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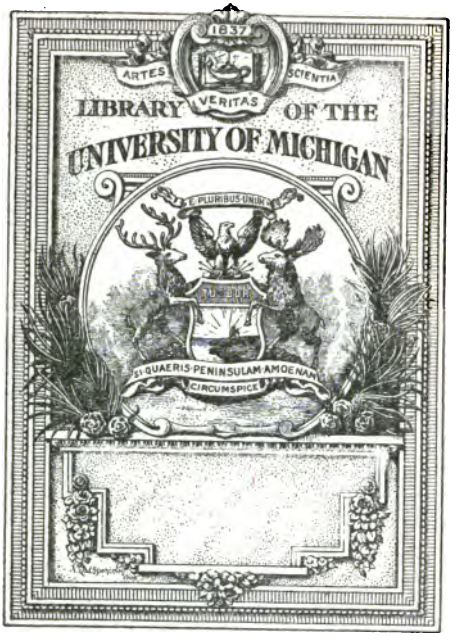
FELIX

BY

ROBERT

HICHENS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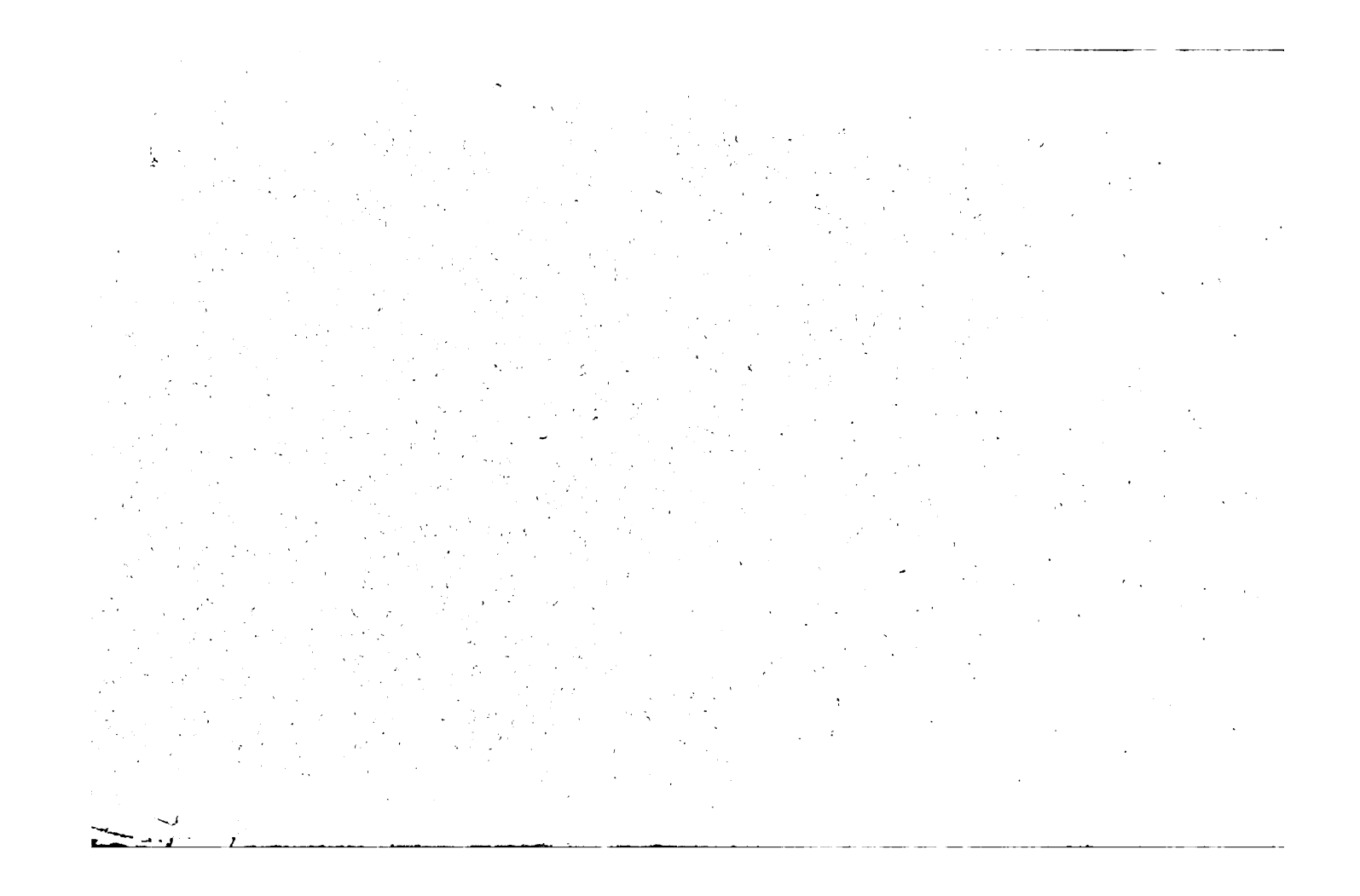

FELIX

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Byeways
Tongues of Conscience
Flames
The Londoners
The Prophet of Berkeley Square

FELIX

THREE YEARS IN A LIFE

BY

ROBERT HICHENS

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
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TO

A. E. H.

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FELIX

THREE YEARS IN A LIFE

CHAPTER I

WHEN Felix had passed his eighteenth birthday he went to France to finish his education. He was a very agreeable, gentlemanly boy, apparently free from any strong vices. He was fairly good at games, and rode well. As a rule his manners were lively. He had many Irish relations. Most of them he had never seen, nor had he ever set foot in Ireland. But his agility of mind and fluency of speech, his rapid sympathies and fluctuations of mood, were un-English. Far back in the family, on his mother's side, there was a strain of Spanish blood.

Possibly from some Spanish ancestor Felix inherited his large and piercing dark eyes. He was tolerably handsome, and very attractive in appearance. His figure was tall and slim. By the time he was eighteen he was over five foot eleven in height. He had a well-shaped head, a neck rather long than short, and small, but decided features, neither aquiline nor *rétroussé*. People always remarked that he had a 'very mobile face.' If they disliked him they occasionally expressed themselves rather differently, and declared that, when he was talking, he grimaced. Certainly he often became excited in conversation, and sometimes fell into exaggeration both of speech and manner. But exaggeration was really natural to him, and he did not know how to hold his features still in a petrified expression when he was pouring out what was in his mind volcanically. His hair was exceptionally thick, smooth, and dark brown. He was imitative as a child, and much given to the worship of people in whom he noticed any peculiarity. A maiden lady with a limp, who lived near his home, received the compliment of an answering limp from Felix, whose legs, unlike hers, were per-

fectly straight and of precisely the same length. A gentleman, dowered with more than a touch of St. Vitus's dance, found many of his sudden starts and unearthly twitchings most accurately reproduced by the attentive little boy, who watched and followed him with a perseverance that was born of undivided admiration. Afflicted persons such as these two moved romantically through the imagination of Felix. Their bodily infirmities seemed to him emanations from highly original minds, manifestations of temperaments both daring and unique. He was disappointed in his parents and only sister, who declined to show any originality of a similar kind. At the age of eight he fell madly in love with a little girl. Her only attraction was a tremendous squint. Just when they were about to become engaged, her mother summoned an oculist, who, by a slight operation, corrected the squint. He also, by the same operation, killed Felix's passion, and the affair was promptly broken off.

Felix's father, Mr. Wilding of Hill House, Churston Waters, Kent, was a country squire. He died when his son was barely sixteen. He was a clever man, full of humour, with a quick temper, a kind heart, and a great love of the country and of simple people, though he was by no means simple himself. His intellect was excellent, and his mind decidedly complicated. But he was a lazy man, and fond of the peaceful routine of country life. Apart from sport, his greatest passion was music. This led him sometimes to London to hear some great artist. But he never stayed more than one night in town, and invariably thanked God lustily for being back again in the country. His intellect, good as it was, was not too good to believe in a God. For years he read the lessons admirably in the parish church, and taught the choir to sing with sincerity of expression and a correct appreciation of time. If, however, they took a chant too fast or a hymn too slow, he lost his temper in the face of the congregation, and had been known to make no uncertain sound upon the wood of his pew with his clenched fist. Then the alarmed organist heeded, and the singers, fixing round eyes upon the musical squire, hurried or slackened, following the domination of his outstretched arm.

He died of influenza and pneumonia, and left enough money to bring in two thousand five hundred a year. By his will this sum was divided equally between his wife and his two children. But Mrs. Wilding had entire control over it till the children came of age.

The death of his father startled Felix painfully. He had

never before known the crude definiteness of personal sorrow. Hitherto his griefs had been vague and his beliefs childish. By the open grave of his father he wondered, for the first time, what followed earthly life, and was by no means certain that descriptive hymns were true. The choir sang at the funeral. They were lost without their teacher. In their emotion they forgot his directions. They dragged the funeral hymn. Even while his tears were falling Felix, who inherited the dead man's love for, and understanding of music, noticed this, and it added enormously to his misery. More even than the sight of the coffin it made him realise that his father was gone, or was no more. The hymn was long, and the choir sang slower and slower, obedient to the impulse of regret. Felix clenched his hand, and longed to beat the right time as his father used to beat it on the pew. He felt as if he owed it to his father to do this. But Mrs. Wilding took his hand in hers and held it. His sister, who was eighteen, and by far the best soprano in the choir, sobbed in her corner. Felix wished that she would sing, and for a moment felt quite cruel to her. But at last it was all over. Even a wrongly rendered hymn is not everlasting.

Mrs. Wilding and her children stayed on at Churston Waters and faced their new life.

Mrs. Wilding faced it bravely. She was a very quiet woman, one of those women whose beliefs are absolutely sure and whose lives are entirely sincere. Nothing could ever make her deviate from the truth as she knew it. She had told falsehoods occasionally by mistake. She was incapable of telling a lie purposely. Dishonesty was so unnatural to her that she could hardly understand it. She read about it sometimes in the newspapers as she read wild romances, and with scarcely more belief in it than in them. No one could be more easily cheated. She had confidence in most people, judging them by herself, but she was not deeply attached to many people. Her family were so much to her that the world was very little. Such a woman does not marry a man without loving him sincerely, and Mrs. Wilding had adored her husband. She was essentially a simple woman, and loved the country. The noise and bustle, the gaieties, intrigues, scandals, and excitements of a great city would have been both wearisome and alarming to her. Now and then, during her husband's lifetime, she went up with him to attend a Saturday 'Pop,' or to see an exhibition of pictures. Before these events she did a little shopping, bought a new hat or some furs—always with her husband's commanding assistance—or went to Hanover Square to be looked at by the

dentist. She also took her children, trembling, to this functionary, and once or twice to a doctor. But it was seldom indeed that she passed a night in town. She had no love, no hatred either, of the theatre, but it was always unpleasant, and even distressing, to her to be in a crowd. Her home was everything to her, and there she worked really hard, taking infinite pains to make it ideal for the three beings whom she loved more than, perhaps, they always fully realised. She was a very nervous woman, was afraid of burglars when her husband was away for the night, could seldom be induced to get into a boat, and perpetually expected railway accidents when she was travelling in the train.

Extremely handsome in middle age, she had been quite a beauty in her youth. Very tall and straight, her figure had never lost its shapeliness, but remained almost as slim as a girl's when she was no longer young. Her features were noble, small, and delicately aristocratic. Her hair became grey when she was thirty-five. She had not married till she was thirty, and when Felix went to France she was over fifty. Her eyes, like his, were large and dark, but they entirely lacked the eager, piercing quality so noticeable in his, and were soft and very gentle in expression. Her manner was usually calm and quietly dignified. She had all her life been entirely free from self-consciousness and shyness. She was not a talkative woman, but she did not mind that, for she was accustomed to live with great talkers. Mr. Wilding was a man who demanded a good listener. Felix was a tremendous chatterbox; and Margot, his sister, had generally several things she wanted to say when her brother allowed her to be heard. So Mrs. Wilding had found her quiet habit by no means unwelcome to those about her. They relied unsparingly upon her sweet and untiring attention. Had she been obviously uninterested in their remarks on any subject, the shock to them would have been as if the heavens had fallen. Probably neither of her children had any notion how implicitly they confided in their mother's devotion to them. Man seldom thinks about the firmness of the earth on which he walks.

Margot Wilding was not at all like Felix. She was a genial, countrified girl, plump, brown-eyed, and with a sweet voice. By nature lazy, like her father, she had occasionally sudden spurts of energy. She was very intelligent, but had no taste for acquiring knowledge. Although she had enough brains to understand the writings of clever men, she usually read trash. She looked robust, having a tall, well-developed figure, bright

eyes, and abundant hair, but she was not very strong, and sometimes had headaches, and those fits of apparently unreasonable depression that come from a weak nervous system. She was very sensitive, had little will but some obstinacy, and the warmest heart in the world. Her chief talent was her music. Her voice was beautiful in quality, and had been carefully trained by her father before he died. Afterwards she occasionally had lessons, and practised by fits and starts. She could easily have sung twice as well as she did, but for an amateur she sang remarkably. Creative talent of any kind she entirely lacked. She adored her brother, who ordered her about sometimes, and was often irritated by her lack of perseverance, but who would have felt lost without her.

Long before his death Mr. Wilding made his wife promise that if he died before she did, she would not wear widow's weeds for him. He said they made the nicest and most modest women look like adventuresses. Mrs. Wilding could hardly have looked like an adventuress in any costume, but she kept her promise. It cost her a great deal to keep it. Indeed, although she never said a word to anybody about it, only after one of the hardest mental struggles of her life did she give her orders for the dress and bonnet she wore at her husband's funeral. There was no crape upon them. No widow's cap covered her grey hair on that terrible evening when, in the house that seemed now so utterly desolate, she took her place at the dinner-table with her two children after her husband's body had been lowered into the grave. It would have helped her to endure her loss if she might have commemorated it as other women commemorate their losses. She supposed that she was very silly to feel this, but she did feel it acutely. That night, in her lonely bedroom, she cried and prayed, and wondered whether she could go on living without her husband. For the moment even her children were like shadows to her. But she never let them know it, and afterwards they became more to her than they had been during her husband's lifetime. For she determined, with the beautiful strength of a simple, good woman, to be doubly valuable to them now; to blend, if she could, a father's influence with a mother's.

She wondered how she could accomplish this; and often, when she was alone, tried to imagine what a good father was exactly to his children, what he supplied them with that a mother could not give. But she was not very imaginative, and had to abandon this pathetic attempt to think herself into a man's nature. Finally she resolved merely to be very broad-minded,

especially in regard to Felix. Men's lives were not, and could not be, so sheltered as women's, she said to herself. Women need not, and ought not to know of many things which exist in life. Men must know of them and face them, as the soldier faces the enemy. She believed it to be her duty, now that her husband was dead, to be before her son in knowledge, as his father would have been, so that, if he came to her in a man's difficulty, as he would have gone to his father, she might be able to help him. Here, however, she found herself perplexed. It was manifestly impossible for her to gain by personal experience the knowledge that it was so desirable for her to have. She had to go to books for it. This she did. From the time when Felix was sixteen to the time when he went to France, Mrs. Wilding read a most varied selection of treatises and novels bearing on the relations between fathers and sons. She read them secretly. They were not allowed to lie about the house. She did not always understand them. Sometimes they shocked her. But when this occurred, she was very strict with herself, saying to herself that they would certainly not have shocked a father reading them. Finally she hoped that she was sufficiently informed to give a manly helping hand to her boy if he should ever ask her for it.

Churston Waters was a small village in one of the most beautiful parts of Kent. The country it stood in was genuine country, not yet spoilt by the mistaken ardours of man for setting God's work in order. There was nothing wild or passionate about it. It was sweet and serene, and looked safe and cosy. Bicyclists complained that it was hilly. Walkers found it quietly varied and full of charming nooks, like a pretty, old-fashioned house. The land was rich. Woods abounded. The grass grew thickly in the rolling meadows, and the dales in spring were crowded with wild flowers. Cowslips streamed over the sunny banks. The hedgerows sheltered modest multitudes of violets, and even the depredations of greedy school-children scarcely seemed to lessen the yellow squadrons of the daffodils.

Hill House stood, rightly, on the top of a steep hill that lay between high and sloping banks. It was close to a yellow church of modern date, and was an unpretentious building, partly old and partly new. Mr. Wilding had added to it considerably. The drawing-room, dining-room, and three or four of the bedrooms dated from 1800, and had low ceilings and uneven floors. The windows of these rooms were latticed, and the walls of this part of the house were densely covered with ivy and, here and there, with wild roses, clematis, and pirus

japonica. There was no drive to the house, which fronted the highroad, standing at an angle, and opposite to a second road that wound, between tangled hedges, to a farm. Behind the house, and to the left of it, was a large, informal garden containing many noble old trees and a famous collection of roses. A great yew hedge sheltered it from the eyes of people looking up to it from the hill road. Beyond the garden the fields sloped gently to a narrow dell, through which a very small and surreptitious stream ran lethargically, and without making any indecent noise. On the right of the house was a walled yard, containing dog-kennels, a pond, and stabling for five horses.

The church was so near that the bells seemed to ring in the garden, and the voices of the choir singing could sometimes be heard in the drawing-room. Both Margot and Felix were disagreeably affected by the bells, whose chimes, especially after dark, made them swim in a limitless sea of melancholy. They dreaded Thursday nights, when the village bell-ringers assembled to practise terrible 'bob-majors' and other musical combinations provocative of despair. Mrs. Wilding, on the other hand, loved the bells, and indeed everything connected with the church. When she was upstairs reading secretly Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, or one of her other Felix books, she often opened her window to hear them more plainly. But she never did this when it was at all cold, for she was extremely nervous about every one's health, including her own. Felix, who loved teasing people, sometimes reproached her with her fears of illness, saying that they were unworthy in a Christian woman. Mrs. Wilding responded by telling him to 'button up' his chest when he went out, or going into the storeroom to compound a certain cough mixture with which she loved to dose herself, her family, and all the parish. The parish liked it because it was very sweet and treacly. Felix took it when Mrs. Wilding thought he was going to have a cough, because he had been accustomed to take it ever since he could remember, and had never known it to do him any harm. He considered it as part and parcel of his mother, like the black icewool shawl she always carried, or left about and sought for. She very easily took cold, and had a strange faith in the protective powers of this shawl, which was perforated with holes innumerable, and, being also very small, hardly seemed likely to keep bronchitis at arm's length. Faith, however, in connection with a material object can work wonders. Mrs. Wilding generally had a slight cold, but without her shawl and her belief in it she might never have been free from one.

Felix went to a preparatory school near Ascot till he was fourteen, and afterwards to Rugby. At both he did fairly well. He might have done much better had he not begun to love the arts at an age when most boys know nothing about them. A passionate devotion to Schubert and Beethoven interfered to some extent with the affection his masters desired to direct towards Cæsar and Ovid. A pianoforte recital, such as he occasionally went to with his father, excited him for weeks. But Cæsar left him very cold. Algebra absolutely congealed him. He was frankly a fool at mathematics. For classics he had a certain amount of talent and some, but not a great deal of, love. History he hated, unless it was concerned with the personal romances of the dead. The advance or retrogression of nations, their fighting in old wars, their mercantile pursuits and financial affairs, their weapons, the spreading of their borders, the size of their armies and navies, their changes of belief or stern steadfastness in faiths, their domestic circumstances, their public virtues, all these facts came before a scarcely concentrated mind when they presented themselves to Felix. He did not want to dive into antiquity through the medium of books, or to rake too sedulously among the ashes of the past. But certain dead and imagined people found in him a lover.

He worshipped Dante as much as he loathed Oliver Cromwell. Charles the Second was to him the most fascinating of all the kings of England, Ulysses the most dear of all wanderers. As a boy he cared more for poets than for warriors, and felt himself more in sympathy with minds daring in thought than with bodies daring in action. Such a sympathy being rare among boys was naturally looked upon askance by masters. They endeavoured to stamp it to death with heavy hoofs. It lived on nevertheless. There was much elasticity in Felix.

He was remarkably quick in acquiring modern languages, and had a musical ear and a power of imitation which helped him in their pronunciation. Anything connected with machinery he abhorred. Only something like necessity brought him at last to a comprehension of the details of the bicycle. His powers and impotence of memory were a perpetual puzzle to his teachers. Things that he cared for, that moved, excited, surprised him, he was unable to forget. Things that seemed to him dull, pale, ugly, without being in any way seizing or horrible, he was equally unable to remember. He could not retain facts that most people know simply because it was considered the proper thing to know them. And so his ignorance often astonished those who were a thousand times more stupid than he was. He had none of

the ardent desire to be what is called 'well informed,' which flames in the breasts of the totally unoriginal. In this respect he was indeed peculiarly shameless, and he was capable of confessing without a blush that he did not know the date of William the Conqueror or the favourite colour of those unbridled worthies, the ancient Britons.

His examination-papers offered up to the eyes of his preceptors a strange mixture of neatly put facts, brilliantly written reflections, and gross, unpardonable errors, and those who taught him were alternately delighted by his cleverness and driven to despair by his apparent incapacity. Although Felix was in many respects unusually sensitive, he often seemed strangely indifferent to the opinions of his schoolmasters. This indifference sprang from the root of his cosmopolitanism. Some people who have not travelled are nevertheless perpetually conscious of the existence of the great world that lies beyond the limit of their sight, beyond the borders of their country. Though they dwell within narrow boundaries they are acutely aware that they are narrow, and wish for their enlargement. At heart they are cosmopolitan. Felix was one of these. Unfortunately, the men who instructed him, although excellent and educated, were men whose opportunities of coming into touch with all sorts and conditions of minds had been limited. Some of them were clever, but they were—or seemed to Felix—devoid of any large aspirations, and absurdly contented with their rather humdrum lot. He thought of them as circus-horses, cantering gently round and round, and kicking up with their well-trained hoofs nothing but sawdust. It was a pity that the teacher with whom he had most to do chanced to be a prig, who honestly, and with his whole heart, believed that Oxford was the world, and that the world was Oxford. The man who had not been to Oxford was to this admirable dullard an altogether unfortunate and inferior being, deprived inevitably of grace and culture, one who could never hope to hold his own worthily, or to be upon equal terms with those who had been duly crowned and sceptred by the great University. Even at Cambridge men he could but sniff. True culture, he conceived, came not from there. Realising that Felix was not an ordinary boy, he endeavoured to obtain what he would have called 'a right influence' over him. The influence he obtained amounted to this, that he planted in Felix's mind a rigid determination never to become an undergraduate.

Mrs. Wilding was upset when she heard of this determination. Her husband had been at Oxford. So had her father, who was

now dead, and her two brothers. She thought that every boy ought to go there unless his people were too poor to send him. At this juncture she endeavoured to play a father's part, assisted by recollections of her private library. She tried to speak to Felix with the authority and passion of a paternal old Oxonian, presenting diligently the inestimable advantages of an Oxford education. Naturally she failed. Felix listened, at first with surprise, at last with undisguised amusement, to her unconvincing arguments, and his final, 'Why, mater, what on earth can you know about it?' was a question her own heart had already answered. For she was generally truthful even to herself.

At the end of their rather complicated conversation Felix expressed a strong desire to be allowed to go to France when he left Rugby, in order to study there the French language, which already he began to love.

Mrs. Wilding was not one of those good Englishwomen who think that the Devil, at an early stage in his career, became naturalised as a Frenchman and went to live permanently in Paris. In her youth she had been a good deal in the south of France and had made many French friends. She had, indeed, very pleasant recollections of the country. But she was certainly startled by her son's request. Soon after it was made she went upstairs to her bedroom, whose windows looked out over what she called the 'church-garden' to the church. It was the summer vacation. The weather was warm and still. She sat down alone by the open lattice, laid her icewool shawl on the sill within easy reach of her hand, and began to think this matter out.

What would Felix's father have said to it? In any difficulty Mrs. Wilding always sought to realise the probable, or possible, workings of the dear dead man's mind. And when she failed in that endeavour she would have recourse to books, make as it were an amalgam of the minds of many fathers, three-quarters of them fictional, and, in a sort of plural impersonation, look upon the doubtful matter with an eye shrewd, so she hoped, as the eye of all paternity.

To-day, gazing out over the narrow lawn, the thick yew hedge, and the deeply sunken road beyond it, to the churchyard with its carefully shaven grass and rows of graves, she recalled her husband, whole, to her mind. That was easy, since he lay in her heart always. She saw him again in the sunshine, drew him into this old-fashioned, fragrant room, which had once been his as well as hers, and asked him silently to speak. Under the

latticed window martens were flying. Maxwell, the sexton, was doing something with a spade among the humble green graves of the poor. He whistled as he worked. There was a low and shifting music of bees from the wild roses which clambered on this side of the house, and a dull noise of wheels from the hidden road. It died away down the steep descent.

The dead man would not speak to-day to the woman who loved him. It seemed to her as if he looked at her steadily, and she saw in his eyes that, despite his old love for her, he had, and could have, no more concern with life. He had passed on and there was no real returning, even in thought, or in prayer, and for a moment. And she fancied that perhaps it was faultily weak of her to cry so often to him silently for assistance. She wondered, too, as she had sometimes wondered before, whether any selfishness of those on earth can affect the completeness of the happiness of those in heaven, whether the pleading appeals of souls still earth-bound, and so often inevitably harassed and unhappy, can trouble or touch with a momentary chill anxiety the serene souls of those whom God has blessed by taking them to Himself. She wished she could know. But the mere doubt caused her to think of herself as almost a wicked woman, one who had sought to trouble the peace of saints.

With an effort that hurt her she forced herself to turn away from the dead man, even to make a conscious endeavour to repel him. She had called to him, and it seemed to her that he had heard her, but that he could not reply. Is it not cruel of mortals to bring home to spirits their impotence by imploring them to do what they may not, cannot do? With this question trembling in her Mrs. Wilding rose suddenly from her chair by the window. The action broke the spell her gentle imagination had been weaving, and just then the voice of Felix called to Margot from the garden. The brother and sister were going out riding together. Mab, Felix's mastiff, barked loudly from the yard. She had seen the horses brought out from the stable and was excited at the prospect of a run. Mrs. Wilding began to consider earnestly Felix's proposal that he should go to France.

It is a mistake to believe that mothers who love their sons instinctively understand them. They understand part of them, perhaps. They know certain, even many things of and in them. But they often come to closed doors, whether they choose to say to themselves that the doors are closed or not. If Mrs. Wilding had thoroughly understood Felix she might have been able to forecast how this contemplated sojourn would be likely

to affect him, whether it would change him, and, if so, in what way. She felt she could not tell. And, because she could not tell, she was frightened to let him go. Once more her reading failed her at the critical juncture. She was amazed at the uselessness of books for a moment, and then, in another moment, was blaming her own stupidity. She was a very humble woman, never conscious of any power of intellect in herself or any beauty of nature. The only thing she was conscious of was that she earnestly wished always to do right.

In the evening of that day after dinner Felix returned to the charge, and his mother, not having been able to make up her mind what a father would have said in answer to so excited and impetuous a demand, granted it with many internal misgivings. So, when he was eighteen and a half, Felix went to France. His mother, through a friend, heard of a charming old French lady who had a house buried in the flowery depths of the garden province of Touraine. The old lady's income was very small, and she received English people who wanted to acquire the most perfect of French accents, and who were not afraid of simplicity and quiet in a place many miles from a railway, and even lying quite off the highroad.

Mrs. Wilding thought that Felix could come to no harm at La Maison des Alouettes.

CHAPTER II

FELIX'S life in France delighted him. At first he was boyishly enchanted by the novelty of it. On his way to La Maison des Alouettes he spent one night at Tours, stopping at the Hôtel de Bordeaux near the station. It was early summer, and the weather was already warm. On the evening of his arrival he went out for a walk, wandered through the narrow paved streets among the tall grey houses, gazed up at the twin towers of the Cathedral of Saint Gatien, and finally found his way to the Loire. Here he stayed till it was quite dark. There had been much rain that spring, and the river was in flood and flowing rapidly. Its breadth astonished the boy. All along the banks people were fishing. Seen from a distance they looked like dolls leaning over the shadowy water. A bugle sounded from the barracks, and from the wooded island beyond the bridge came the melody of a Viennese waltz tune played by a string band. The river eddied round the stone piers of the bridge with a dull, sucking murmur. Some soldiers went by, and two women in white caps, with enormous frills and long white streamers. A pretty little girl, bareheaded, and dressed in a pale-pink cotton frock, came up to Felix and offered him roses from a big basket which she carried on her arm. While he was buying some the sound of the band on the island, which had died away, stole again over the water. It was playing a Hungarian tune full of shuddering melancholy and fire. The dolls on the high banks of the river bent over their thin black lines, and the sky grew darker. Felix was filled with a rapture that was chaotic and half painful. All the beauties, the mysteries, the passions, and the sorrows of life seemed suddenly to flow together, and to pass murmuring through his heart as the river passed murmuring through the arches of the bridge. Tears sprang into his eyes, and he longed to do something great, to create something or to help somebody. But the longing, though violent, was vague. It was like a fluid that cannot be grasped. It swept on and away into the darkness, and Felix thought that he could hear the

whispering voice of it dying down in the dimness of the night. The band on the island ceased from playing, and he turned to go back to the hotel. He descended the Rue Nationale, walking slowly. The pavement was thronged. Young men strolled along with short black cloaks hanging from their shoulders. Women passed with flowers stuck into their hair and thin shawls over their arms. Felix thought of his mother's icewool shawl, and felt abruptly homesick and lonely. Presently he came to some cafés. They were brilliantly lit up. Inside them waiters with short bristling hair and white aprons hurried to and fro, jingling cups and glasses, and shouting '*V'là, Monsieur!*' Out in the air stood many little tables. People sat by them smoking short, almost black cigars, and drinking coffee and mysterious liquids that Felix had never seen before. In front of one café he hesitated. He thought of sitting down, of ordering something and staring at the passers-by like the other customers. But he walked on. He felt suddenly uncomfortable in the midst of all these strangers, and as if they were hostile to him and he were hostile to them. The sensation died almost as soon as it was born. When he reached the Place by the Café de l'Univers, and saw the fountain playing and the trees, he resolved to join the drinkers and smokers, though, being alone, he could not share their vivacity. He sat down by a table on the pavement and, after some consideration, called for an absinthe. When it was brought, and he had sipped it, he thought it disgusting. He did not finish it, but sat looking about him. Two men close by were playing dominoes. One was quite young. He wore a short black beard. His face was deadly pale, and there were blue rings round his eyes, which looked feverish and tired. He talked incessantly, and Felix noticed that his hands, which were horribly thin, trembled almost as if he had palsy. To Felix, in his ignorance, this man appeared to be a sort of incarnation of the life of cities and of their vices. He imagined him going at night down side-streets into extraordinary houses, gambling, cheating, getting drunk, making love to other men's wives. And he examined him with a sort of half-respectful curiosity mingled with disgust. The man, who was a commercial traveller afflicted with chronic dyspepsia, went on playing dominoes without taking any notice of Felix. Occasionally he sipped some lager beer from a tall glass which stood beside the domino-box. He was really quite respectable, a good citizen, and an ardent admirer of Drumont, whom he looked upon as the highest type of patriot. He made Felix think for

the first time with definiteness of a town life and of what it must be like. The pallor of the commercial traveller's face continued to excite him for many minutes, and the rattling of the dominoes on the marble-topped table sounded in his ears like the murmurs of a dissipation which he knew nothing of.

Presently he heard a church clock strike ten. He paid for his absinthe, knocking on the table with the knob of his stick to attract the attention of the *garçon*, and got up to go back to the hotel. Just before he turned the corner by the Hôtel de L'Univers he glanced back at the fountain and noticed the great statue of Balzac. It loomed up in the faint light cast by the lamps with a bulky impressiveness which attracted Felix strongly. He retraced his steps till he stood before it. Although he had never read one of Balzac's books, this effigy of the famous man who had been devoured by a genius that was almost like a vice within him, compelling him to defy the laws of health, stirred Felix strongly. In the rather theatrical illumination and blackness produced by the lights of the café and the masses of trees, the face of the statue looked heavily powerful and ruthless, like a face that confronts everything in the world without fear, without pity, but with a penetrating determination to know the truth. Felix stayed for several minutes to gaze at it, and it made him feel very acutely how little he knew of the truth of anything. His youth and ignorance oppressed him. He resolved to come back and see the statue in daylight, and on the morrow he returned. Again he received from it the same impression.

La Maison des Alouettes stood on a hill quite alone. An avenue shaded by two lines of tall poplars, and running at right angles to the highroad, led to its iron gate, which was set in a big white wall. The house was an old farmhouse covered with creepers, which reminded Felix of those which grew on the walls of his home. Small windows peered out from the mass of greenery, and were protected from the fierce suns of summer by striped awnings fastened to iron rods painted white. Behind the house was a bowery garden stretching up a gentle hill, and in one corner of it, sheltered by trees, stood the remains of an old ruined chapel, almost concealed by the green mosses which clung to the crumbling stones. The nearest village, Artannes, was several kilometres away, and the peace of this country flooded with tree and plant life was profound and unchanging. On still days the ringing of the distant Angelus bell could be faintly heard from the court, and at night hidden frogs gave forth their glassy note, and the

night-jar whirred. The cows lowed in the yard beyond the farm-buildings, and Brisa, Madame Bernard's little Maltese dog, barked at the bats which flew low over the yellow gravel. A verandah ran along the front of the house, and here Madame Bernard's guests used to sit to take their coffee and improve their French accent after dinner at half-past six. Felix loved these quiet evenings of summer. The talk was often gay, for Madame—or Grand'mère, as nearly every one called her—thought it incumbent upon her to be very conversational, and, despite the many misfortunes and sorrows with which fate had tried to overwhelm her, preserved a great vivacity of spirit. In the occasional pauses of the talk the silence was like a soft green liquid, bathing the dwellers in La Maison des Alouettes, and flowing out over the sloping vineyards to the river, which ran through the valley between forests of enormous rushes. Even the stars that twinkled over the garden province looked blessedly countrified, Felix sometimes thought. He wrote home enthusiastic descriptions of all the rural joys. This was in his first summer. He had quite forgotten the pale face of the commercial traveller at the Café de l'Univers, the sound of the rattling dominoes, and all his thoughts of towns that night.

There were two other boys in the house learning French, and in August two girls, sisters, twenty and twenty-two respectively, were added to the party. Various expeditions were made. Madame Bernard mounted into an old waggonette, from which she chaperoned her five guests, who rode their bicycles, going slowly to suit the paces of the fat, white horse. In this fashion the neighbouring country was discreetly scoured, and many of the châteaux were seen. Felix loved the châteaux. Their beauties, fashioned by the pious dead, touched him strangely. Their gardens filled his heart with the sound of Time's footsteps. In one there was an old, uncovered well. He looked down into it, and saw water dripping from the edges of the stones, and these drops seemed to him like the tears of the things that remain for the men and women who must pass so quickly away. Sometimes he went off alone for long tours on his bicycle. And he was very happy on these solitary excursions.

When the autumn of his first year in France was dying into winter, he one day set out for a walk by himself. He was now Madame Bernard's sole guest. The two sisters had only come out to spend a summer holiday, and the two boys had gone back to England in October, magnificently improved in French, and lustily blessing Grand'mère. They were to enter

at Scoones's. Felix did not miss them much. He had got on with them quite well, but he had not found them very interesting. They were, in fact, ordinary, good-tempered, healthy English lads, fond of what they called a 'lark,' and 'up to anything.' Felix liked a lark too, but he had other tastes which they did not share. He enjoyed bicycling with them, or going on the river with them. But their perpetual society was scarcely stimulating. On parting they had all sworn to meet again in England, and have a 'rare old spree.' Meanwhile Felix and Grand'mère were *en tête-à-tête*. To-day Grand'mère was confined to the house with a chill.

It was the first really cold day of the winter. There was the breath of frost in the air. The vines slept in the hard brown earth, and the river flowed sullenly between the discoloured and shivering reeds. As Felix turned out of the avenue into the highroad he saw a solitary water-hen steering through the leaden flood, which broke into tiny ripples round its feathery breast. In these ripples there was a faint and momentary hint of light. The bird disappeared in the shadow of the further bank. Felix stood for a moment waiting to see it come out into the main stream. But apparently it preferred to stay under shelter. He buttoned up his coat and proceeded on his lonely walk.

The aspect of the country had suddenly changed. Hitherto it had looked like a great, rich, tangled garden in which everything grew rankly, abundantly, pushing its way to the air and the sun with an almost violent disregard of its neighbours. Even in the dying autumn Felix had not been conscious of the greatness of the transformation that was active around him, among the woods, in the deep meadows, along the hillsides, in the gardens of the frugal, steadfast peasants, and by the borders of the river. He had watched the changing hues of the leaves, and had rejoiced in the pageant that went gorgeously before the oncoming car of death. But now he stood by the car. During the last few days a wild wind had been blowing in the valley. It had shaken the leaves from the trees. The poplars stood bare along the white road. The hedges were half naked. It was impossible to imagine the big grapes bulging with their sweet juices in the vineyards, which had an aspect of surely abiding barrenness. And the sky was heavy with clouds. Mists lay wreathed among the aisles of the woods above the orange tangle of the rotting ferns, and by the river. The green silence of the summer had flowed away to some far-off garden of the sun. Yet there was beauty in this cold, still emptiness,

dignity in the brown slopes of the vineyards, and in the sternly naked trees, which showed the delicate perfection of their limbs distinctly now that their leaves were gone. For the first time in his life Felix asked himself the question, Is there any ugliness in Nature, in any season, if she has been left unaltered by the hand of man? And he was aware that in this absence of any attempt at decoration, in this fading away of colour, there was loveliness: loveliness in this dull, grey sky dashed with long lines and gashes of white, in the paler greys and the browns of the trees, in the faint grey greens of the grasses and of the bramble leaves, in the white of the road, which was more blinding and less mysterious than the white of the broken patches in the sky.

Presently the road sank between high, crumbling banks of brown earth. It was impossible to see far here, and Felix was glad. He liked the sudden dimness created by the tangle of the trees that spread away and upward on either side of him. His intention was to continue on the road which led eventually to Sachet. He had some idea of visiting the curé there, with whom he sometimes fished, and perhaps of strolling through the garden of the château where Balzac once rose in the noon of night to work till the noon of day. But presently he saw a little path winding to the right among the tree trunks. Although he had often walked this way he had never noticed it before. And as he was repelled by the present aspect of the open country, and found it almost horrible in its sickly intensity, he resolved to follow the path which was sheltered in its beginnings. He therefore turned from the road and disappeared among the trees.

The path, though narrow, was very definite, and no doubt led either to another country road or to some woodman's or keeper's hut in the forest, which stretched for a long way here. Felix followed it with a certain curiosity, wondering whether he would come to the home of a solitary at its end, whether he would find some one with whom he might break the spell of the white silence that was so suffocating. The twigs which lay here and there on the path crackled under his feet, and the yellow and bending ferns shook feebly as he brushed against them in passing. To right and left of him he saw the mysterious vistas of the forest, full of the *débris* of the autumn which the rains of winter had not yet turned to the utter rottenness so longed for by the tranquil ground. The wayward bushes hunched themselves together in unnatural shapes, and the curious parasites of the trees clung and crawled about the gnarled bases of the trunks. Mosses, showing gleams of the palest yellow among their green,

upturned their queer little horns like tails of angry scorpions. A strange bramble, with leaves whose under sides were claret-coloured, flourished sturdily, holding its own where all else bowed to the growing will of winter. And here, among the trees, Felix mingled the breath that came from his lips like smoke with another breath that was not in the open country, a breath cold, vital, and deep-drawn, issuing from the lungs of the woods.

The path wound on and on, but no habitation appeared, nor even a clearing marked by the stacks that prove the wood-cutter's labour. Felix began to despair of coming upon the solitary, whose presence he suspected, and whom he wished to see. Perhaps this path existed only for the passage of those who mark the trees, or was trodden by children seeking wild flowers in the more gentle days of the year. Every moment he said to himself that he would stop and turn back, but the path tempted him forward. It curved, and he felt that he must just see what lay beyond the curve, or it sank down into a depression, and he thought that he must explore that nook ere he went homeward. At length he heard among the trees a soft, shuffling sound as the smaller twigs bent and cracked. He looked up. Heavy snowflakes were falling. He made up his mind to retrace his steps, and was actually swinging round to do so, when he saw a thin spiral of blue-grey smoke rising among the trees and the white flakes. There was a hermitage here. He had not been mistaken. He walked on and, in two or three minutes, came to a small open space in which stood a low white cottage with a sloping roof covered with slates. Two or three hens were scratching and pecking before the door, which stood half open, showing the pale glimmer of a just-born fire; and as Felix approached, a small, yellow dog, whose pointed nose was in ill accord with a drastically curled and pug-like tail, stepped leisurely out into the air, lifted up its voice and uttered a tiny, but very piercing bark. The glimmer of the fire was suddenly hidden, the yellow dog's tail wagged without uncurling, the door was pushed more widely open, and a small, and apparently very old man appeared, bending forward his head and peering out through the snow.

Felix drew near and saluted him. Certainly he was very old. His small face, covered with a brownish-yellow skin that looked almost like leather, was seamed with deep wrinkles. His lips were folded inwards, and moved incessantly under a bristling white moustache, in which two or three black hairs still sprouted in a curiously unnatural manner. His pointed chin, beneath

'The tailor of Balzac!' repeated the boy, completely puzzled.

'The same, Monsieur,' said the old man, who seemed, with every passing second, to increase in dignity and pride. 'You have, perhaps, heard of him. Very well, I who speak to you—I am he!'

'But,' said Felix, 'Balzac has been dead for—oh, for ever so many years.'

The old man advanced from the press to the fire, always with the same theatrical and striking manner, as of one conscious that on him are focussed the astonished and admiring eyes of a universe. His movements were almost processional, and he again uttered his little dry cough, covering his pursed-up mouth with his right hand, then once more stretching it forth to emphasise his remarks.

'Monsieur supposes me to be young?' he said, arriving at the hearth and standing still, with his right leg slightly bent.

Felix hardly knew what to reply. The question was obviously absurd, and was possibly intended to be so. Yet the intonation of the hermit's voice was not definitely ironic, and the expression that emerged from the embrace of his wrinkles, which seemed to Felix to become incessantly more numerous, appeared to be one of earnest inquiry.

'I cannot guess your age,' Felix said, with an attempt at boyish diplomacy. 'But surely Balzac——'

'Monsieur, I am seventy-five.'

'Indeed. As much as that?'

'Seventy-five, Monsieur. Judge then whether I am speaking the truth when I say that I am Balzac's tailor.'

'Oh, Monsieur, I did not doubt you for a moment. I was only surprised and interested.'

The old man looked gratified, and straightened his leg with a sort of military abruptness.

'All the world is surprised, Monsieur. It is not every day that one can see the tailor of Balzac. Permit me to offer you a glass of wine.'

Felix was about to decline this suggestion when the old man hastened to the corner in which the array of bottles stood, selected one, and, returning to the table, set it down with such obvious hospitable anxiety that he thought it more polite to accept.

'There are glasses in the press,' added his host. 'Very good glasses. They came from Tours, where one can buy everything of the best.'

Moving with remarkable agility he produced two thick

goblets mounted on fat stems, rubbed them carefully inside and out with a duster, uncorked the bottle, and poured out some red wine.

'We will drink to him, Monsieur,' he said solemnly, lifting his glass in an almost religious manner. 'To the greatest man who ever lived, him for whom I made trousers without feet—Monsieur Honoré de Balzac.'

Felix, who was on the point of raising his glass to his lips when the old gentleman came to the conclusion of his exordium, very nearly dropped it. But the piercing blue eyes which were fixed upon him startled him into self-control. He only spilt a drop or two.

'Trousers without feet, Monsieur,' repeated the old man, setting down his glass, and smacking his lips loudly several times. 'This wine comes from Vouvray, I assure you.'

'It is very good,' said Felix. 'Excellent.'

'It is not worthy of him, but it is quite pure. The vineyards of Vouvray are famous.'

'Then you knew Balzac?' asked Felix.

'How could I measure him, Monsieur, if I did not know him?'

The old man, who had been preparing to sit down, thought better of it, stood up straight, and struck another attitude, holding out both his arms and raising his enormous, tufted eyebrows. Two or three drops of wine hung at the left-hand corner of his mouth. His eyes began to shine with excitement.

'How could I set down the length of his immortal legs, the size of his calf, the span of his waist, if I did not know him? Monsieur, I have touched him. I have touched a god. Did I drop the tape? Certainly not. But who might not have done so? I should not have blamed myself. No indeed, I should not have blamed myself at all. But I said to myself, "Courage, Louis! This is a great day for you. Do your duty well, and you will have something to be proud of all the rest of your life." I seemed calm, Monsieur. It might have been you I was measuring, it might indeed.'

Felix was captivated by the old man's transparent pride. And then, too, he remembered how he had stood before Balzac's statue at Tours, and how it had impressed him by its power, and given him a knowledge of his own ignorance. This odd meeting in the snow began to interest him and to awake his instinct for romance. But he felt ashamed of never having read one of the books written by this old peasant's idol, and hoped sincerely he would not be brought to

'A pair of breeches, Monsieur!' he repeated loudly.

Felix was carried away as by some startling situation in a drama. Despite the sense of humour which prompted him to laughter, he felt inclined to applaud. The old man had a remarkable power of evoking a scene. Felix had been in the tailor's shop, had seen the shadow of a mighty fame darkening the poor man's sunlight, the shining shears clicking in the nervous hands, the murder done on the miller's festival coat. And now the tragedy swept to this golden ending. He felt the glory like a warm garment flung over him.

'Bravo!' he cried. 'Bravo, Monsieur!'

'Monsieur,' retorted his host, 'you are a brave! Permit me to grasp you by the hand!'

And he seized Felix's hands in both his own, which were trembling violently.

Felix was suddenly afraid that his old age was paying a heavy price for his triumph, and would have broken in upon his speech to let him rest, but he was now fully launched. Only some natural phenomenon, an earthquake, a water-spout, or the frenzy of a storm leaping upon the cottage, could have given him pause.

'Monsieur,' he continued, still in a queer, high voice, 'again I passed a sleepless night. "Merciful heaven!" I kept on thinking, "if I should go wrong with the tape! If I should squeeze the legs of Monsieur Balzac by cutting the breeches too small, or give him a *migraine* by making them too large." (For I must inform you, Monsieur, that if the legs of trousers are too wide at the bottom the wind will find its way up them, and, by causing the liver to take cold, may very well affect the head of a customer.) The notion that any action of mine might upset such a world-wide head as Monsieur Balzac's threw me almost into a fever. How could I know that the trousers were to have no feet? No one had told me. How, therefore, could I suppose it?'

He stopped for a moment. His little blue eyes fiercely demanded a reassuring answer.

'Of course you couldn't,' Felix said quickly.

'No. I knew you would say so. Well, when morning came I can tell you I was in a fine state, and, when I set forth to the château, I walked like a man going to the guillotine. My tape was in my hand, and I kept on saying to myself, "Courage, Louis, courage!" This I repeated till I got to the château. And there they said to me, "Go into the garden, Louis. Monsieur Balzac is in the garden writing." "Writing!" I said.

"Then let me go home. If Monsieur Balzac is writing——" "No, no, you are to go into the garden. And mind you are quick with the trousers. Monsieur Balzac is in a great hurry for them." Monsieur, I went into the garden, and there, away to the left, just where the ground dips, under a tree, sat Monsieur Balzac.'

The old man paused. He seemed overcome by his recollections. The fire and almost intemperate vivacity in his small blue eyes died out slowly. He stared as if he watched something deeply interesting.

'Monsieur, it was true, he was writing. There was much sun that day, but he sat just in the shade and could look out over the garden. On his right hand was a little table, smaller than mine. It was all covered with paper. Monsieur Balzac was not sitting before it like another man would. No, no!'

'But how did he sit, then?'

'Like this.'

The old man eagerly pulled his chair forward till it was beyond the table, stretched his right arm back till his hand reached the table, and made a violent motion of writing.

'That was how he wrote?'

'And he never looked at the paper, Monsieur. All the time he wrote he stared at the garden like this, as if he saw people walking in it.'

The tailor glanced wildly about the room, like one watching the movement of a live thing between his chair and the wood fire. While he did so he continued to agitate his hand furiously upon the table. His long nails made a dry, tapping sound.

'That was how he wrote, without ever looking at the paper. Monsieur, he could see his people all about the garden. His eyes were so wide open they were terrible. I did not know what to do. I did not dare to interrupt him, but he caught sight of me standing there, like a dog that is ready to run all ways from fright, and beckoned me to come nearer. I came, grasping my tape and still repeating to myself, "Courage, Louis, courage!" Well, Monsieur, I had to make haste, I can tell you. He stood up with the pen in his hand, and then it was that I measured him—the greatest man of France.'

'And did he say anything to you?'

'When I had measured him I would have shown him some of my samples. I thought he would wish to choose a material. But no, he would not look at them. "Something warm" was all he said. And then, Monsieur, he added that they were on no account to have any feet.

'But what do you mean by that?'

'They were to have no openings at the bottom for the feet to go through, but were to be closed quite up like two sacks. I could not understand it, but I did not venture to say a word except, "As Monsieur wishes! As Monsieur desires!" How I was going to make them I could not tell at all. But I bore myself as if I had already made many trousers without feet for all the countryside, and was in no way disturbed. When I was going I bowed profoundly. But, Monsieur, I was so distracted that I forgot my tape. Think of that! I left it lying on the table, where I had put it down in my agitation. I did not find this out until I had reached the terrace, and then——'

He paused, shook his head several times, and made a clicking sound with his tongue against his lips.

'You went back for it?'

'Monsieur, I did, on my toe-tips. Monsieur Balzac was again writing and staring at the garden. I crept up behind the table, as a rat creeps to food in the kitchen when the cook is by. My tape lay under a sheet of paper. For a moment I did not dare to take it. My hand was trembling. But Monsieur Balzac did not seem to see me. At length I stretched out my hand and seized my tape. But the sheet of paper rustled, and suddenly Monsieur Balzac looked round. There were great lines all across his forehead, and his eyes were bloodshot. Then, Monsieur, I—I ran as the hare runs.'

'You ran away?'

'To my shame, Monsieur, I did. But I made the trousers. They had no feet, and Monsieur Balzac always wore them at night when he was writing. That was what he wanted them for. He did not wish to put on shoes, and when he got up at midnight he would slip at once into my trousers with only his stockings on. And when he passed through the village afterwards he would always nod to me, and sometimes he would say "Good-morning."'

The tailor was silent, wiped the perspiration from his brow, drew from beneath his blouse an enormous cotton pocket-handkerchief, and blew his nose sonorously. Then he turned towards the bookshelf.

'There I have all his books, Monsieur. As Monsieur Balzac's tailor, it is right that I should have them, is it not?'

'Quite right,' said Felix.

It was beginning to grow rather dark in the room, and such illumination as there was came rather from the flames of the

fire than from the dying daylight at the window. Felix glanced towards the bookshelf. The long line of books, whose dark-green backs now began to look almost black, fascinated him. He thought of the rugged statue of the man whose brain and whose soul were bound up in them.

'You have read them all?' he said.

'All, Monsieur.'

The old man went up to the shelf, gazed at his treasures with romantic eyes for a moment, then returned and stood before the hearth close to the little Honoré, who was snoring faintly with wide-open eyes. His small and spare figure was lit up by the wood fire behind him. He stood with his feet wide apart, holding up his blouse with his veined hands, and in the triangle formed by his legs and the floor Felix saw the golden and red flames playing round the logs which, in places, were charred and grey. One solitary and small flame was pale blue. It hissed faintly. A little, thin jet of smoke, like a feather, rose behind it. Marthe was still hunched up on the hearth, gazing sourly at the fire with her spotted eyes. There was a moment of silence, and in it Felix suddenly realised the isolation in which the cottage stood, the dim forest all round it, the softly falling snow. When the old man stopped speaking the quiet was intense. Felix felt as if he and the tailor were two figures in an old picture, a picture in which the flames defined the edges of mystery, and the black shadows were dramatic, seeming to reveal as well as to hide. And with them, in this old picture, was surely the spirit of the statue of Tours. It seemed to the boy suddenly as if the tailor's acquaintance with Balzac were his acquaintance also, as if he had seen the bloodshot eyes roaming over the garden, following the activities of the brain-creatures in the strong sunshine of France. He glanced again at the line of books, and was filled with a violent longing to read them. The old man followed his eyes.

'Monsieur,' he said, 'after I had seen Monsieur Balzac, those books drove me from my village to Paris. I was seized with a restlessness that was, I assure you, like a devil within me. I kept thinking, "Shall one man know everything, another nothing?" Sachet became horrible to me. Then, too, I thought the man who is good enough to be the tailor of Balzac is surely good enough to make trousers for any one in Paris. I shut up my shop and I started for Tours. From there I went to Paris.'

'And how did you get on there?'

'Monsieur, I almost starved. In Paris they did not want me.

When I explained that I was Balzac's tailor they laughed at me. I made some trousers for one or two, but, Monsieur, they did not give complete satisfaction. I cannot tell why. To me they seemed well cut. The material was stout and good. Still they were not to the taste of Paris. At length I had no money. I had no customers. I was obliged to return. I was ashamed too, for, in going, I had said to everybody, to all the village, Monsieur, that I should make my fortune in Paris. I feared the laughter of the hen-brained, Monsieur, it was poor-spirited of me, and I came to live away from them in this cottage, which was once a wood-cutter's. That is many years ago, and the people round are glad now to have their clothes from me, and have ceased to laugh at me for going to Paris. But I stay here. When I am alone here I sometimes read my books, and then I see again the streets of Paris and hear the voices of Paris. Ah, Monsieur, it is in great cities that the heart beats strongly and the brain is full of thoughts. Here, in the forest, there is nothing but the trees and the silence.'

He went over to the door and opened it, letting the edge of his blouse drop.

'Look, Monsieur! Listen!'

He stood away a little from the door to let Felix see. The afternoon was fading into evening, and the square vision of the forest without was extraordinarily wan and ghostly. The trees looked soft and thin, languid under the cruel attack of the new weather. A wind was rising as the day died. The white flakes spun in it across the aperture of the door, and in the combination of the rapid movement and the utter soundlessness of them there was something peculiarly uneasy and desolate. One or two shafts of reddish-yellow light from the fire pointed across the brick floor to them like fingers. And the moist and frigid breath of the forest penetrated through them slowly, like a sad live thing, striving to edge its way among a multitude of tiny, but obstinate enemies towards happiness. In the shadow by the door stood the bent form of the tailor peering out.

'Nothing but the trees and the silence, Monsieur,' he repeated. 'Nothing but that. And yet, far away, what a world there is! *Mon Dieu!*'

He shut the door sharply, crossed the floor rapidly to the bookshelf—his big shoes clattering on the bricks—took down a volume, opened it, and thrust it into Felix's hand.

'There! there!' he exclaimed, and again there was the bird's note in his voice. 'Think of it all, Monsieur! Think of it all!'

Felix looked into the book. The title of it was *Illusions Perdues.*

He read a page and then another. He forgot the forest, the snow, the darkness coming on, the old man regarding him attentively from the fire.

In his ears there was no longer silence, but the hoarse roar of the huge and flowing tides of life.

CHAPTER III

FROM the day of his visit to the cottage in the forest Felix was conscious of a change within him. Something in his nature which had been sleeping woke. He could scarcely have named it even to himself. It was, perhaps, as if his ears, formerly deaf, had been partially unsealed, and now heard for the first time clearly the deep and strong pulsation in the heart of life. He began to listen to it with an attention that was passionate, and to wonder whether, as he grew older, it would seem to beat more powerfully. Looking backward over his few years in the world, he was able to recall two or three occasions when he had perhaps heard this significant and central sound, but so dimly that it was more like an echo than a voice, more like the music of an imagination than the music of a great truth. One of these occasions was the funeral of his father, when for a moment he had almost forgotten his grief in anger at the faulty performance of the village choir. Another had found him alone upon the bridge at Tours, listening to the murmur of the river beneath the arches, and to the wail of the band upon the island. On a third he had gazed in the night at the statue of Balzac.

He came back through the snow from the tailor's cottage with one of the green volumes, carefully wrapped in a remnant of cloth, in his hand. It was *La Cousine Bette*, selected by him at hazard as the volume of initiation. The tailor had begged Felix to enter at once into a close acquaintance with his idol, and had shown an almost childish and very simple pride in being able to confer so memorable an honour as introduction upon his grateful guest. All the way home through the forest Felix had heard ringing in his ears the words of the ardent old fellow, 'Shall one man know everything and another nothing?' He believed that he had drawn very close to that cry of the ignorant heart in the night beside the statue at Tours, and he wondered whether he would always repeat the feelings and desires of others, whether it were possible to do anything else even once in a lifetime. He could not tell. He could not tell anything. And

he felt burdened, crushed by his new knowledge of his vast and echoing ignorance.

When he reached La Maison des Alouettes, Grand'mère had gone to bed. Her chill had weakened her, and the evil change in the weather had had a bad effect upon her condition. He went upstairs, found her drinking tea, which she never took but as a medicine, bade her good-night and came down to a lonely evening. The wind continued to rise, as if stirred to action by the obstinate falling of the snow. After dinner Felix drew his chair to the fire in the little drawing-room and, observed by the photographs of Grand'mère's whiskered husband and two bland daughters in garden hats, saw the curtain go up on *La Comédie Humaine.* Just before he went to bed, at an early hour of the morning, he looked out into the garden. It was covered with snow. The wind whistled over it. He felt as if the snow, and the wind, and this prospect empty of houses were a dream, as if Paris were the only reality.

In his quiet home life at Churston Waters Felix had been happy. He had enjoyed his schooldays well enough. His summer in France had brought with it new and delightful sensations, a feeling of emancipation, of being out in the world, of standing on the edge of a lifetime and looking towards long vistas of experience. But hitherto fate had set herself to encourage rather the simplicity that was in him than the subtlety. His mother and sister were simple people, natural in their habits, their desires, their expression of them. The sweet calm of the country enveloped and influenced their souls. They moved in it as in their appropriate element. And Felix had always felt truly at home with them, although his temperament was different from theirs. He, too, had an ardent love for nature. Without analysing the fine sanity of nature he had drawn that sanity freely into his soul as a man draws the pure air of sea or mountains into his lungs. He was, so far, wholesome-minded and wholesome-bodied. But he was secretly more impetuous than he knew. From this secret impetuosity came his curious and apparently unreasonable melancholies and his tendency to exaggeration. Till now, circumstances had, upon the whole, been sedative in his life. The chime of his mother's influence had rung to him with the chime of the church bells, yet without depressing him as they did. Her quiet piety and unwavering belief in things unseen, her appreciation of and trust in the goodness and honesty of those about her, had been so constant that they had seemed to her children rather main attributes of humanity than qualities peculiar to her. Public

school life had not shattered the fine image of man she had set up in the heart of Felix. The brotherhood of boys in England is usually a brotherhood of frankness, creating hardihood rather than hardness, breeding a quick reliance rather than a slow mistrust.

La Comédie Humaine set Felix face to face with an undreamed-of world, with a world whose tragic fires lit up the whole arena of his imagination. And the place in which he came to know these crowds of ardent people, these fiercely striving and passionately greedy financiers and journalists, these envious politicians and thirsty poets, these *cocottes* devouring society, and patient, betrayed women, whose very virtue was often sad as an epitaph upon a tomb, assisted, by its unwavering peace, their violent effect upon his mind. At first he was shaken by their intensity, and almost appalled by their activity in deeds. Their extraordinary and persistent energy seemed to him as engrossing as the feats of a superb acrobat, but scarcely more normal. He had never met such human beings, and, in the beginning of his acquaintance with the great comedy, he doubted whether they ever had been met with by any one. But by degrees he was conquered by the genius of the author and acknowledged silently that such people had lived, were living now. He was convinced. He felt 'in his bones' that though this might not be truth as he knew it, yet it was truth.

When he had come to this conviction he was enormously stirred. Great literature seldom puts into us what we do not possess already, but it very often wakes that which is latent within us. In Felix it woke a sudden passion for the life of cities, for the tumult of a crowded existence, for the ardour of striving wills, for the melancholies and the joys of the streets. When the spring came again to the garden province, and the airs were once more gentle, he often retreated into the ruined chapel with one of the green volumes which the tailor was so ready to lend. He had carried a garden-chair there, and in the shadow of the crumbling, moss-grown walls he read for hours. The pale sunbeams of the budding year lay sometimes across his page. Tiny insects moved mysteriously through their jungle of shaking creepers above his head. A bird alighted on a pointed stone in the arch of a shattered window, watched the student with round, shining eyes, tipped its tail at him impertinently, and flew away. The sound of the distant Angelus bell came up the valley to him faintly, hinting that there was a calm God above all these raging men, in whose strange lives he was plunged, whose crimes and passions he watched as through

a microscope. Sometimes Felix did not hear it. Sometimes he heard it and shivered. One day he asked himself why this voice of the bell seemed to him frightful, penetrating, like a silver ray, through the red and dusky fire of the lights of Paris, why this thought of a God watching over the world struck through his heart like the cold blade of a dagger. But he did not find the answer to his question. And again he bent over the page.

He and the little tailor had become great friends, and Honoré no longer barked when he heard Felix's step upon the narrow path in the forest. Felix often sat by the table watching the old man's large hands, furrowed and twisted with age, busy with the cloth, cutting out, sewing, patching. He grew to look upon the tailor with a curious interest that was almost reverential, thinking of him often as one of Balzac's characters set before him in the flesh. For must not this creator of a gigantic population, this mighty painter of crowds, have seized upon all those whom he met and compelled them to be his models? Felix often questioned the tailor about his life in Paris, and the tailor, whom conversation almost intoxicated, launched forth with fervour on this congenial subject. Felix mentally compared his account of the city with the many accounts of it given in the *Comédie Humaine.* Despite the fact that it was the place of his starvation and most utter misery and loneliness, the tailor worshipped Paris and could never speak of it but with ecstasy. Again, in his talk, Felix felt the strange attraction of crowds and of the infinite possibilities of adventure that lurk in cities. In London he thought, or in Paris, each morning brings its exciting vagueness, a vagueness alive with conjecture. And each night—what do the nights bring?

The tailor's life in Paris had been scarcely romantic. He had lived wretchedly amid squalid surroundings, had toiled at his trade, and, too often, had failed to find the customers he so energetically sought. He had known scarcely any one, or had any gaiety or pleasure even of the poorest and most humble kind. But, in narrative, uplifted by an imagination almost Gascon, he managed to place his poor existence among romantic lights and to surround it with a certain glamour of excitement. And had he failed to do this, Felix, steeped in the genius of Balzac, would have done it for him. The lonely cottage often held strange colloquies. The clicking of the great shears made an accompaniment to the long solos of the tailor and the soft purring of Marthe and the thin snore of the little Honoré, mingled with the questions and the tirades of Felix, who often

got excited, and poured forth from the depths of his complete ignorance rhapsodies on life in the great world.

Meanwhile calm nature was developing in the forest all round the two enthusiasts. The pale smile of little leaves ran over the faces of the trees. Among the mosses, damp with the tender dew of spring mornings, tiny flowers appeared, lifting cups of the softest colours toward the delicate skies that arch the youthful year. Blithe blades of grass pushed up in the shadowy glades and in the clearing before the tailor's house. In the nights delicious showers fell like benedictions, and the bright mornings brought with them a harvest of sunbeams which waked in all the birds the strong spirit of utterance. They sang on and on till it seemed as if only in silence could they ever know fatigue.

Felix scarcely noticed the spring this year. His mind was fermenting, and he looked inwards upon himself, seeking himself, striving to find himself among the hurrying figures of the *Comédie Humaine*. Which of their passions were his also? Which of their desires flamed in his soul? Which of their loves would one day be his? With what type of man or woman was he most earnestly in sympathy? He continually asked himself these questions, and he thought that when he could give an honest answer to the last he would be nearer to a right knowledge of himself than he had ever been. But as yet he had not been able to give this answer. His sympathies changed and flowed this way and that, now circling about one character, now about another. Sometimes he was amazed to perceive how great was his power of forgiveness, how difficult he found it to condemn. He had never chanced to hear the saying that to know all is to pardon all, but the truth that lies behind it rose up spontaneously within him. Yet, is not the man who is constitutionally unable to condemn the human being who does a base act unrepentantly of necessity a weakling and unworthy?

Felix debated this question many times in reference to one of Balzac's characters, the Baron Hulot.

This man, and the frightful ruthlessness with which the author presented him, fascinated Felix. He followed that libertine career with an excitement which almost frightened him, and when the last sordid, coarse, and brutal act was accomplished, and on the eyelid of the heroic dead woman, who had been a martyr to her husband's ruling passion, glittered a tear, —the tear she had not shed in living—Felix was conscious of an exultant sensation. This exultation was caused, he felt, not

only by the grim and ferocious genius of the writer, but by the completeness of the man written about, by his supreme inability to change. He could not behave decently. Had he been translated to the Heavenly City, he would have wandered through its streets seeking the attic chamber of a soubrette. There was something triumphant in such persistence of evil in a human soul, something almost sublime in this powerlessness to stop short, to become different, to be influenced.

One day, when he had been saying this to himself, Felix suddenly thought of his mother.

Her face, and the grey hair that crowned it, her large, gentle eyes that could not look unkind, rose up before him. It seemed to him as if he gazed on her for the first time with a consciously appraising glance, as a man may examine a stranger, closely, importunately. Balzac was teaching him to analyse human beings, and he began by trying to analyse his own mother. That seemed cruel. But he was rapidly passing into a mental region in which cruelty had a very definite and almost honoured place. In thinking thus closely and analytically of his mother the first thing that struck Felix was how very little she knew of life. He compared her quiet existence with many of the existences in the *Comédie Humaine*, and it seemed to him that she had never truly lived at all. She had never been out into the great world, mingled with its drama, looked upon its fierce griefs and fiercer pleasures, shared its voracious passions. No; she had seen the quiet years go by in the house upon the hill, had listened at her window to the chiming of the church bells, had talked with the country neighbours, whose limitations Felix now began to perceive with piercing keenness.

How would she look upon the sinners in the wild comedy of life?

Hitherto Felix had been accustomed to listen to his mother's advice with a certain reverence and generally to accept it, relying upon the instruction which he had supposed inevitably to walk hand in hand with age. He now felt sure that he had made a gross mistake in supposing that anything of that kind is inevitable. A boy of sixteen may know far more about life than a woman of sixty. One thing was certain. His mother could know scarcely anything. Her ignorance must really be profound. He felt himself pitying her. Presently he began to wonder whether she had any idea how ignorant she was, whether she regretted it, whether she had ever, as a girl or as a quite young married woman, wished to know the truth of life,

or whether she had consciously shrunk from such knowledge. And then he remembered remarks he had heard her make, which showed that she considered it the duty of a good woman to reject much knowledge; for instance: 'There are many things one does not wish to know,' and 'It is much better not to know that certain things exist.' Once he had been thoughtlessly ready to agree with her. He felt sure that he would not be able to in future. At this stage in his life it seemed to him that to see the truth of everything quite clearly was vitally important, was indeed the first duty of a real man or woman who declined to be a shadow. Thinking thus, he wondered whether, when they met again, he would not be obliged to put his view of this matter before his mother in opposition to hers. The idea of doing this excited him, and he often turned it over in his mind, imagining scenes in which he brilliantly combated the objections which came flowing freely from her limited appreciation of the root-facts of humanity. How she believed in people and how she believed in God! He began to try to dissect these two allied beliefs, and asked himself which was the child and which the parent. No doubt she saw God's image in her acquaintance. Had she numbered the Baron Hulot among them, would she have found it also in him? Felix smiled at the thought.

He naturally employed what he supposed to be his now carefully sharpened and finely tempered faculty of observation in his daily life. Grand'mère was committed by fate to his dissection. He set to work upon her with extraordinary vivacity and self-confidence.

She was a sweet old woman of whose past life Felix knew but very little. She had been born and educated in Russia, had eventually married a rich merchant, a Frenchman, who was living in Petersburg, had come with him to France and settled in a fine château on the banks of the Loire, had given him two children. So much of fact Felix knew. He also knew that Monsieur Bernard had eventually lost nearly all his money and died, that Madame Bernard had been forced to leave the château and retire to La Maison des Alouettes, where, ever since, she had eked out her painfully modest income by receiving—well, in fact, Felixes. Madame Bernard was now sixty-two. Her face was brown, puckered, lit by brilliant, almost black eyes, and framed in quantities of snow-white hair on which she never placed a cap. She preserved a very great vivacity and a captivating air of youth. Her energy was abnormal. She cooked, gardened, marketed, gave French lessons, in summer walked every

morning to the river, and ducked herself bravely in the shallow water under the shadow of the rushes. Her manners were frank and full of delightful homeliness touched with something spiritual. The expression of her face was observant, motherly, fearless, even when it was sad. Every one liked her. Felix almost loved her. But he began to dissect her.

He who takes the scalpel to the corpse feels very superior to the corpse. Felix soon began to feel very superior to Grand'mère. He was too gentlemanly a boy to show it intentionally. It is certain that he must have wished to conceal it. But Grand'mère was after all a Frenchwoman and had her little intuitions. She was mightily amused by the change she noted in her guest, the new relation that began to exist between herself and him. It woke her up like a flirtation and seemed to set a late lark singing in the twilight of her nature. From the throne of her age and many sorrows she bent down to play with Felix. While he was trying to dissect her, she was metaphorically dancing round him. She saw the scalpel, but he did not see the dance, so her secret gaiety encountered continually his public seriousness, and La Maison des Alouettes held for a time a quite excellent little comedy, in which, if he had but known it, Felix came off second best.

The result of his dissection of Grand'mère, which was no dissection, was that, after a time, Felix put down the scalpel, ticketed the corpse, and laid it solemnly away, while Grand'mère was laughing in her corner.

'Woman. Old. Kind-hearted. Amusing. Knows little of life. Easily contented. Enjoys trifles. Never thinks of the great problems by which we are all surrounded. Is engrossed by the small things of the day. No reader of character because she always looks on the bright side of things. Has little idea what the world is like. Probably never thinks about it. A good cook. A delightful hostess. As fond of cold water as an Englishwoman. A perfect grand'mère.'

Something like that was Felix's secret report upon the corpse. And yet he was not a fool. He was only a boy whom life had not had time to educate and who thought he was educated; something like the learned man who lives between book-covers and pronounces judgment on the nations and the spheres.

If he could have seen into Grand'mère's heart, if he could have wandered for a moment in her mind—say when she lay sleepless under the faded red canopy of her bed at night; if he could have heard the prayers she said to the Virgin, the confession she made to the curé of Artannes; if he could have

followed, with silent foot, her dreams waking or sleeping, he would have hesitated long before he undertook again to label any woman.

Once or twice Grand'mère was tempted to show him the true face of his ignorance. But she refrained. She remembered the joy of her own young simplicity and the bitterness of its passing, and she let him keep his sensation of superiority.

Having thus comfortably dissected Grand'mère, Felix plunged once more into the *Human Comedy*.

Before the time came for him to leave La Maison des Alouettes he had read the whole of it. When he had done this he felt as if he were an elderly man burdened with enormous experience, having passed along all the paths of life, talked with all the pilgrims by the way, seen the most secret workings of their hearts, followed the footsteps of their passions, divined if not observed every action they had performed. He thought of the souls of the pilgrims as interior palms, on which each deed committed had traced a tiny line, of himself as the unerring palmist reading the lines and telling the pilgrims precisely what they were. And his pilgrims were very much astonished when they learnt from Felix what they were. They had really not known till that very moment.

The tailor, of course, had long since given up his soul, mind, character to the inspection of his frequent visitor. There was a fiery simplicity in him, and he did not dance, like Grand'mère, while he was being dissected. Instead, he talked of Balzac and of Paris. He had almost renewed his youth in the joy of sympathetic intercourse with one to whom he had had the privilege of revealing the glory of his idol. Felix's young worship of Balzac revived his old adoration. He was never weary of repeating the history of his measurement of the novelist and describing the exact shape of the celebrated trousers without feet. And Felix did not tire of listening. He always hoped for some new detail, and plied the tailor with a thousand questions.

One afternoon, when the time was drawing near for Felix's final departure from La Maison des Alouettes, he sat smoking a pipe in the doorway of the cottage in the forest. His old host as usual was at work, cutting out a Sunday coat for Monsieur Camusot, the barber of Sachet. It was the month of April and the day was warm. The light that streamed across the clearing was pale and chequered, for there were many clouds in the sky, fleecy and white, robust-looking too, full-bellied monsters that moved slowly before a light wind, or lay gathered together in

squadrons on the western verge of the blue, as if waiting to show their glory as the sun went down. When the sun was hidden for a moment the aspect of the clearing changed, not violently but with a sort of secret gentleness. The many shades of colour in the piled-up trunks of trees recently cut down grew slightly darker. Browns with a hint of red in them were invaded by a suggestion of black. Whites that had been silvery and shining became dulled and grey. The pointed blades of grass, that sprouted vagrantly, and sometimes in isolation, here and there among the tangle of low-growing and sparse brambles, looked more wan and companionless, and the narrow sections of space between the stems of the growing trees more mysterious and exciting, yet infinitely more dismal. A dusky shadow, that was yet far away from darkness, stole over everything, like the sound of a remote and nearly suppressed grief gliding into the ears and calling a heart from its complete happiness.

Felix was watching these changes through the door of the cottage. The shears clicked behind him, and he heard the creaking and constant shuffling of the tailor's shoes on the brick floor. Neither he nor the tailor had spoken for some minutes. A critical moment for the coat had arrived. This kept the proud workman silent. And Felix was idly and half dreamily fascinated by the woodland vision under the lights and shades of spring. The continual changes in it, and the slightness of them, rocked his mind as if in a cradle that was pushed by a tired foot. There was magic in the subtleties of nature in the forest under this clouded sky, but it was a very quiet magic that made no nerve tingle, no pulse beat.

The tailor dropped his shears on the table and sighed. Felix looked round.

'What's the matter? Anything wrong with the coat?'

'No, Monsieur.'

'Then why do you sigh like that?'

'Monsieur, I am old. When you are old you will often sigh without requiring a reason at the moment. There is enough reason in the world for more than all our sighs, and tears too, believe me.'

The tailor was standing by the table with his hand resting heavily upon it. He looked weary. There were two or three drops of perspiration on his forehead.

'The old man's sorrow comes to him with the spring,' he added, leaving the table and coming forward to the open door. 'That's the time when age calls out in him.'

Felix suddenly felt more keenly the fascination of the season

intense reluctance to leave this quiet hermitage. He wondered whether he would ever come back to it, and what he would have to tell the tailor if he came.

As he went on he sighed. There was something strangely beautiful in the silence to-night. A damp smell came to him out of the inmost recesses of the forest. Looking up he saw through the trees the evening star and the ethereal crescent of the new moon.

Was there a human comedy being played in great cities far away? He felt to-night as the wide world held but a trinity of individualities: God, Nature, himself.

CHAPTER IV

FELIX arrived at Churston Waters on a Thursday afternoon. His mother and sister were standing at the hall door with glowing faces to greet him, and as he kissed them he forgot France, all the plans he had been forming, all his hopes for the future, in the comfortable joy of being once more at home with his own people. At tea in the familiar low-roofed drawing-room he looked at them with eager, inquiring eyes. His mother was totally unchanged, calm and gentle as usual. Her face was lit up by a shining happiness which made her seem quite young. Felix smiled as he noticed her icewool shawl lying on the sofa beside her when she sat down and took up the silver teapot. He was glad to see it again, and felt inclined to pick up the dear old thing and stroke it. Then he glanced at Margot, who was sitting in her characteristic position, which he remembered so well, squarely on her low chair with her small feet slightly turned in. Her sensitive, brown eyes were fixed ardently on her brother, and when she met his eyes she blushed. He was conscious of her shyness, and suddenly began to share it. For a moment he could think of nothing to say. Mrs. Wilding distributed the teacups quietly. Margot, having begun to blush, became quite violently red. Felix looked away from her towards the latticed windows, which were shut.

'Why, mater,' he said, 'it's quite warm to-day, and we aren't getting any air. Shan't I open one of the windows?'

'Well, I don't know. The wind's in the east, Felix,' said Mrs. Wilding with some hesitation.

'But there isn't any wind. Have you got a cold?'

'A slight one. But you might open the far window in the other room.'

Felix got up to do it, and Mrs. Wilding picked up her shawl and put it round her shoulders. When he had opened the window, Felix leaned out of it for a moment to look at the familiar garden. The lawn had just been mown in honour of his arrival, and was bright green. He longed to pass his hands

over it. Early roses were blooming along the narrow gravel path by the house, and the great fuchsia stood by the oval seat under the yew-tree drooping its red tresses. The laburnum swayed gently in the breeze, which was not in the east as Mrs. Wilding supposed, but which blew, on the contrary, from the west. Swallows were darting about with the whimsical vivacity that makes them so youthful a feature in any landscape. Over the great yew hedge the yellow church gleamed in the sunshine. Its bell chimed the half-hour. Carriage wheels sounded on the hidden road, and from the village school came a confused and faint noise of children's voices. How different it all was from France. There was another flavour here. La Maison des Alouettes was more utterly retired and peaceful than Churston Waters, yet to Felix at this moment it seemed as if nothing could be more cloistered from the turmoil of the world than his home. The sounds of life he heard accentuated his feeling of remoteness from the cries and footsteps of what he called mentally real life. Those voices of the children proclaimed the gaiety of utter ignorance. Felix listened to them, he fancied, as the old Faust listened to the music of youth and of jocund labour outside his study window, with a mingled pride of detachment and thrill of envy. How little they knew, and wanted to know, those children!

'Felix, you'll catch your death of cold.'

His mother spoke. He laughed, and came back to the tea-table. Margot was still rather red. She looked down into her teacup.

'It's all just the same,' said Felix. 'Not a thing altered.'

'You have grown broader, Felix,' answered his mother. 'You sit up better than you did.'

'I'm a man now, you see, mater.'

'How is your French?'

Felix said a few words quickly in that language. Mrs. Wilding replied fluently, but her son noticed that her accent was exceedingly British. Margot did not venture into the conversation, although she was decidedly good at languages. She was frightfully diffident, and inclined to think herself a fool at everything. This little episode broke the slight constraint which had begun to prevail in the family circle, and Felix, who was always stirred to unusual vivacity by tea, began to hold forth with all the volubility and emphasis that were natural to him. In France he had caught the trick of gesture, and this made the contrast between him and his mother and sister the more striking. He had just begun his second cup of tea and third tirade on the

delights of foreign life when the butler opened the door and announced:

'Mr. Bosanfield.'

Margot's round cheeks bloomed out anew, as she and her mother exchanged a hurried glance, and a tall clergyman came in, dressed in a neat, black, bicycling costume, with a jam-pot collar, and holding a soft black hat in his hand. Felix got up. He felt vexed. Mr. Bosanfield was a stranger to him. The name had been mentioned several times by Mrs. Wilding and Margot in their more recent letters; and Felix remembered that the clergyman had been described as the new rector of a church in the neighbouring town of Frankton Wells, by his mother as a very conscientious, hard-working man, and by his sister as the possessor of an excellent tenor voice. Felix looked at him while he shook hands with Mrs. Wilding and Margot.

He was evidently not old, perhaps thirty-six or seven. His face was clean-shaven, brick-red, and resembled the faces of men bred up among horses. The nose was hooked, the mouth firm and intent, the hair black and retreating from a high forehead. The eyes were small and grave, dark grey in colour, and overshadowed by penthouse eyebrows, which reminded Felix of the eyebrows of Balzac's tailor. The ears were large and slightly pointed like a fawn's. His manner was staid and definite, and his actions were noticeable for their finished deliberation. He came into a room as if he had previously thought the matter of the best way to come into a room thoroughly out, and had decided, for all time, how he meant to do it.

Mrs. Wilding, who seemed for the moment distinctly less calm than usual, introduced Felix to the clergyman, who shook him by the hand in rather a peculiar way, gripping him with a tight pressure that struck him as oddly full of will and meaning.

'Ah, you are the son who has just been living in France,' the visitor said, in a voice undoubtedly tenor. 'Very glad to welcome you home again.'

He sat down next to Margot. Felix was surprised by his remark. There was a suggestion of intimacy in the way it was made, a definite attempt to draw near. Margot was sitting with her feet turned in more than usual, and looking frightfully uneasy. Mrs. Wilding poured out some tea for the visitor. Her hand shook perceptibly.

'I came back to-day,' Felix said, rather coldly.

'To-day—yes. I heard you were coming. I once took a

'Felix, please don't use that expression. I know you intend no harm, but we shouldn't bring the name of God into ordinary conversation like that, I think.'

'I beg your pardon, mater. But you don't mean that——?'

'Mr. Bosanfield loves Margot. I couldn't write to you. It has only just happened.'

'Happened! What's happened? Margot can't possibly——'

'Felix, he's a good, sincere man, and Margot loves him very much.'

Felix felt as if all that had been firm and settled in his life were falling to pieces with uproar.

'Margot love a man with ears like that!' he cried, far from his sense of humour. 'Bigoted too, and—what does it matter if France is Catholic? And then all that rot about the priests being lazy and looking horrid, as if all priests were alike! Mater, you mustn't let her. Why, it's too beastly! The very first day I come home!'

He felt fearfully excited, and as if a cruel injury had been done to him. Mrs. Wilding put her hand gently on his arm.

'I was afraid it would upset you, Felix dear,' she said. 'I knew you'd be very much surprised. But I had to do what was right. You wouldn't have wished me to act unfairly to Margot?'

'Do, mater! What d'you mean? What have you done?'

'As they both love each other they naturally——'

'You don't mean to tell me they're engaged!'

'It only happened yesterday. I did not think I ought to refuse. My boy, do try to think a little of your sister.'

'Good God!' Felix said again. 'Good God!'

He walked away to the window and stared out into the garden. Everything he looked at seemed to have changed, to have become ugly and dreary. He whistled mechanically the tune of an old French song Grand'mère was fond of playing at La Maison des Alouettes. All the muscles of his body felt contracted. Then he stopped whistling and again repeated, 'Good God!'

Mrs. Wilding was dreadfully distressed. She had been thankfully happy to welcome her son to his home. Felix, in his eager gaiety of youth, had no idea of the pain his long absence had caused her. Every day she had missed him, thought about him, prayed for him. His return had been to her as a great festival. Tears had rushed to her eyes when she stood at the hall door and saw him driving up the road past the village school. He and Margot were everything to her. That

his first day at home should be marred cut her to the heart. She did not know what to do, but she got up from her sofa and followed him to the window.

'My dear boy,' she said, 'I want you to remember that I shall lose a great deal in losing Margot, but it would be very wrong of me to interfere between her and a right happiness.'

'Margot married to that brute!' said Felix, biting his lips.

'Please don't, Felix.'

Mrs. Wilding took out her handkerchief and furtively wiped her eyes. Felix began to feel hot and angry against his mother.

'A clergyman too,' he said. 'A clergyman!'

At that moment he realised for the first time how much he had changed while he had been in France. He had begun to learn that there was in his nature something which absolutely forbade him to accept as certainly true anything which he had not investigated and proved to his own satisfaction to be true. He thought that clergymen did that more often than other people.

'I would rather see Margot the wife of a good clergyman than of a man in any other profession,' said Mrs. Wilding, with her habitual sincerity which never deserted her. 'Surely nothing can be finer than to devote one's life to furthering the only true knowledge of God.'

Felix felt as if he were a clever, grown-up person listening to the opinions of a child who had never been out of the nursery.

'Oh mother, what nonsense!' he said. 'Why, three-quarters of the clergy are only what they are because they happen to be the sons of clergymen, or to have been taught that the English religion is the only proper one. You yourself would have been as ardent a Roman Catholic as you are a Protestant if you'd had Roman Catholic parents and married a Roman Catholic husband. The only true knowledge, you say! And who knows what the only true knowledge is? You don't. Margot too! Why, she has hardly seen anything, and you let her marry this ridiculous, narrow-minded—oh, in two minutes I found out what he was, just the very sort of man I hate. Pooh! judging France from a fortnight's bicycling-tour with a brother-clergyman!'

Mrs. Wilding's soul was filled with fear.

'Felix, did that priest you know try to influence you?' she asked. 'I know priests often——'

'No, no, no. He always talked about carp and fishing-tackle. Mother, you don't understand me a bit, or what I mean.'

'Have you changed, then, so much while you have been

tailor, of his mental life in the ruined chapel with the Baron Hulot, the Père Goriot, and how many others. He heard the sound of the Angelus bell ringing far off in the distant valley, and remembered how it had sometimes recalled him from the existence of dreams and made him feel cold and afraid. Now he longed to hear it really, not only in fancy, and he knew that, could he do so, he would think its little voice most sweet. The group of three people in the low-ceilinged room seemed to have nothing to do with his real self. Even the old tailor had understood him more than they could, had been more akin to him. The clergyman was turning his bunch of pansies round and round between his long, reddish fingers. He looked steadily at Felix with his small, firm eyes.

'I hope to welcome you to the rectory,' he said, 'and to show you our church. It is really a pretty one. Norman Shaw designed it, and we have a Kemp window that is, I take it, an excellent specimen of his work.'

'Thank you,' Felix said.

'Perhaps when you are riding or bicycling you will look in?'

'Thanks very much. It's very good of you.'

Mr. Bosanfield turned away, with the air of a man who has done the exactly right thing in the exactly right manner, shook hands carefully with Mrs. Wilding and Margot, and bade them good-bye. Felix accompanied him to the hall door, where his bicycle was standing against the stone wall that skirted the high-road as far as the stables. Mr. Bosanfield bent down to arrange the clips on his neat and narrow black trousers. Having done this he returned slowly to an erect posture, and put his soft black hat on his head, pulling it well down by the brim. Under the hat his face looked different, less horsey, but older and plainer. He laid his left hand on the seat of the bicycle and grasped Felix's hand with his right.

'Well, good-bye to you,' he said, with calm heartiness. 'I am very glad we have met at last.'

Again Felix was conscious of his determination of will and intention to draw near, and felt the recoil within himself.

'Thanks awfully. Good-bye,' he replied, with an attempt at careless ease.

Mr. Bosanfield wheeled the bicycle out from the wall, put one foot on the step, hopped three times, and mounted. There was character in each of his hops. Felix noticed that. He did not even hop anyhow. Felix looked after him till he was a black doll on the white road, like the black dolls who bent in the night over the river Loire. As Felix turned to go back into

the house he recalled the strange sensation which had filled his heart as he heard the distant music on the island mingling with the murmur of the water round the piers of the bridge, the desire which had come to him to do something great, the flood of beauty, mystery, passion, and sorrow which had swept through his soul, murmuring its message.

Mr. Bosanfield was glad that they had met each other. What was the good of their meeting? He was hurrying home to his choir practice, and he was doubtless quite contented and entirely wrapped up in the forthcoming performance of 'Praise His Awful Name' on Sunday evening. Well, well!

When Felix came into the drawing-room Mrs. Wilding was holding her icewool shawl over her mouth while she shut the window he had opened. Margot was at the piano turning over some music, and looking nervous. She started, when her brother entered, though she must have expected him.

'Margot,' he said, 'come for a walk round the garden. I haven't seen it yet.'

'Yes, Felix.'

She left the piano slowly. Her round face was full of humility, and her voice sounded quite obsequious. Mrs. Wilding looked from one to the other of her children, but she did not say anything, and they went out together in silence. When they were in the garden Felix said abruptly, 'Mater's been telling me.'

'Telling you! O Felix, you don't mind? You aren't angry?'

'But that isn't the question. I'd give everybody the right to act as they please, yes, everybody.'

He was suddenly amorous of the gospel of freedom, which he had scarcely thought about till that moment.

'Would you? I suppose everybody should be able to know what they—to know themselves,' Margot said eagerly, though vaguely, and still in the obsequious voice.

'That's just it,' Felix said. 'They should, but more often than not they know nothing about themselves.'

'Don't they?'

'I found that out in France. When I went to France I had literally no idea of what I was really like.'

'Hadn't you? Well, but how odd!'

'I don't believe it's odd at all. I believe most of us are hideously ignorant about ourselves. I expect you are for one.'

'Oh, can I be?'

'It's not difficult,' Felix said, with a kind of elderly sarcasm. 'But I can tell you it's a bad business to alter your whole life

before you know what you really are, and so what you really want. I shouldn't care to do it.'

'I 'm nearly twenty-three, you know,' said Margot anxiously. She divined what was coming.

'You look about eighteen.'

'Still, I shall be twenty-three on my next——'

'And with the sort of life you've led,' interrupted Felix inexorably, 'it's next to impossible that you can form a right judgment of a man. What do you know about men?'

'What do I know? How do you mean? I've met a good many men.'

'Yes, at tennis-parties, village concerts, out at dinner. Do you suppose men show what they really are when they're in society? How can you get into a man's mind, or see the workings of his nature, when he's talking a lot of twaddle that he thinks will please you at the moment, or smiling to satisfy a number of old women who'd die of horror if they knew what he was really like?'

Margot began to look very perplexed.

'But you talk as if all men had something dreadful to hide,' she murmured.

'And so most of them have,' answered Felix, with emphatic sincerity.

Suddenly he thought of the commercial traveller of Tours. Ah! he understood now what the lives of such pale men were like. He began to feel quite fatherly to Margot, and all his irritation had disappeared.

'My dear child,' he continued, 'if you could only realise how difficult men are to read, you wouldn't rush into a marriage with one, I can tell you.'

Margot blushed at this allusion to her love affair.

'I don't know about rushing,' she began in a low voice.

'How long have you known Bosanfield?'

'Ever since he came to St. Mary's, about six months.'

'Six months! How old is he?'

'Thirty-six and a half.'

'So there are just thirty-six years of his life that you know nothing about.'

'Oh, but, Felix, you don't suppose he's ever done anything dreadful! Why, he's a clergyman, and——'

'There you go, just like mater!'

'Like mother?'

'She's been talking as if a man who is a clergyman couldn't do anything wrong.'

'I'm sure Ste—I mean Mr. Bosanfield—couldn't.'

'Why?'

'Because he's the most conscientious man I ever met,' cried Margot, suddenly losing her nervousness. 'He thinks of nothing but what's right.'

'Then he's a jolly shallow thinker,' retorted her brother.

'But he's very clever indeed.'

'How d'you know that?'

'He did splendidly at Oxford.'

'Is that why you want to marry him?'

'No—of course not,' said Margot, looking down at the gravel walk, on which they were slowly pacing, between the short, stiff rose-trees with their little labels.

'Then why?'

'Oh, Felix! Why does any one want to marry anybody?'

'Come now, Margot, you don't mean to tell me that Mr. Bosanfield is your hero of romance!'

'I think he's the best man I ever met.'

Felix began to chafe under this continual setting of moral excellence before all other qualities. It seemed to him that both his mother and sister were exceedingly limited people.

'Dear me! Virtue isn't everything!' he cried. 'Some of the stupidest and most boring souls in creation keep the Commandments.'

'Mr. Bosanfield isn't stupid or boring,' said Margot, getting hot. 'He's very intelligent and well informed.'

'I know exactly how it is. You're so pleased with him for loving you that you think he's a paragon. That's a woman all over.'

'It's not that at all.'

'You're not pleased with him?'

'Yes, but——'

'Then it is that. And if some arrant rascal had fallen in love with you, it would have been just the same. My dear Margot, I know you. You're so humble that any one who showed he thought a lot of you would carry you off your feet directly. You think nothing of yourself, and you've no more will-power than a baby. I'll bet anything that at this moment you're feeling positively grateful to Bosanfield because he's said he's in love with you.'

The conscious expression in his sister's rosy, round face showed him that he had hit the mark.

'I knew you were. Good gracious, Margot, I wish you'd think a little more of yourself. You're worth twenty Bosan-

fields. But you're just like mater in all those ways. I never saw such humble people. He's not humble.'

'He's not at all conceited. But naturally in his position of authority——'

'Authority! A rector at three hundred a year's position of authority!'

'Well, it is. He has to arrange and direct——'

'Performances of "Praise His Awful Name" and Mothers' Meetings. I know. If you marry him you'll live a limited life, you'll have a squeezed intellect, you'll be contented with a twaddling, little existence.'

'You're very unkind,' said Margot, almost in tears. 'It's not a twaddling, little existence to be a rector's wife. One can be very useful and do—do a great deal—of—of good.'

She gulped, and looked so frankly miserable and hurt that Felix felt a moment's compunction.

'Don't cry about nothing, Margot,' he said.

'How would you like it if I were to speak as you do about somebody you cared for?' she asked piteously.

'I was only saying what's true.'

'But you don't know him. How can you? You've only seen him for a quarter of an hour.'

'Quite enough too,' said Felix.

He honestly believed that he knew the clergyman through and through. Margot had a tremendous opinion of her brother's cleverness. She was, indeed, vaguely inclined to think that all men were clever in a way. Cleverness seemed to her an attribute that went with their sex. But to-day she showed, for her, unusual tenacity.

'It isn't enough at all,' she answered. 'Why, just now you said I couldn't know what Stephen was like in six months.'

'Stephen!' cried Felix, feeling as if he had been stung.

'Mr. Bosanfield.'

'That's different. You're a girl without any knowledge of life.'

'But you——'

'Margot,' Felix said impressively, 'I've been to a public school and also to France.'

'I know you've been to France, but only to a tiny little place with scarcely anybody there.'

Felix smiled rather loftily. Was not the crowding population of the *Comédie Humaine* there?'

'In that tiny little place, as you call it, I learnt more about life than you'll ever know if you become Mrs. Bosanfield,' he answered. 'You—Mrs. Bosanfield!'

Margot was overwhelmed with confusion and with something else by his last two words. She looked at him with eyes which had become suddenly so expressive that they startled him. For a brief instant, as he met them, he felt as if his sister were an utter stranger to him, a stranger complicated, ardent, even mysterious and elusive. Then she dropped her eyes, hesitated for a moment, and hurried away to the house without another word.

Felix stood still. There was a small William of Orange rose growing on a tree close to him. His eyes fell on it. The leaves of it were sincerely green, delicate, comprehensible. The petals, curling slightly outward, were pale at the edges, but lower down deepened in colour till the closely guarded heart of the rose became a mystery of brownish-orange, and seemed to have a fragrant bloom of sensitive fire. Was a woman like that, and did he only see, as a rule, the pale edges of her petals? Was Margot like that? As he stood there looking at the little rose he felt stupid and curious, consciously boyish for an instant too. All the knowledge he had seized out of the pages of books slipped away from him as water slips out of a glass held obliquely. But even while he was doubtful about Margot, he felt certain that he knew all about Mr. Bosanfield.

CHAPTER V

IT seemed to Felix that evening as if he were a stranger in his own home. He stayed out in the garden for a long while after Margot left him, and when he came in she had gone to her room to dress for dinner. His mother was just going to follow her when Felix appeared in the drawing-room, looking unusually dull.

'I don't know how it is, mater,' he said at once, 'but I don't seem to understand Margot a bit as I used. I think she's altered somehow.'

'Women always alter when a great affection comes into their lives,' replied Mrs. Wilding quietly.

'A great affection for that man!' cried Felix. 'Mother, you and she must have lost your senses!'

He turned and went out of the room. Mrs. Wilding's calm acceptance of the situation made him feel almost violent. He had been accustomed to feel that he was a ruling spirit in the household since his father died. Nominally of course his mother had always been in authority, but Felix, during his holidays, had generally had his own way in almost everything. His mother and sister were such quiet and unselfish people, and till now his desires had been so boyish and legitimate that it had been seldom indeed necessary to thwart them, and without such necessity Mrs. Wilding was the last person likely to assert her authority. As to Margot, although she was sometimes what her brother called 'mulish,' especially when there was any question of her exerting herself very actively, the occasions on which she had set up any opposition to Felix's will were rare indeed. Most only sons alone in a house with women become instinctively autocratic. To-night Felix was conscious of the internal irritation of the Grand Turk gently resisted if not defied by members of his harem.

Just as the Wildings were sitting down at the dinner-table the church bells began to ring.

'Oh, I say—is it Thursday?' exclaimed Felix. 'Of course it

is. I do hate those bells. They might have let me off on my first night at home.'

One of his black melancholies began to steal over him. The way had been prepared for it during the afternoon, and the bell-ringers, unconsciously, set it in motion towards its victim. Mrs. Wilding talked cheerfully instead of, as usual, listening with untiring interest and patience to the talk of others, but she got little response from either Felix or Margot. The one was frankly gloomy and taciturn, the other nervous and constrained, and the persistently chiming bells seemed, even to Mrs. Wilding, to create an uneasy and melancholy atmosphere in the dark summer night. Her imagination could not join the imagination of her son in fantastic promenades about the black places of the earth, or, with Margot's, sit down almost sulkily to brood, but she too was sensitive in a high degree. Beneath her calm and motherly air she concealed a deep capacity to feel, and her tenderness for her children was so great that no mood of theirs could fail to affect her intimately. To-night she had put on her best gown. Some black tulle was twisted deftly, almost coquettishly, in her beautiful white hair. At her neck she wore the finest jewel she possessed, a big diamond set in green enamel, from which hung three large and shapely pearls. These little preparations had been made not all from vanity, but solely to do honour to her boy. So simple was she that she had thought of them for days before his arrival. She had even, in spite of the uncomfortable events of the afternoon, carried them out with some eagerness and, perhaps, a womanish idea that Felix, noticing her in the garb of festivity, would be won from his vexation, that his pleasure in being once more with those who loved him and set him on high would conquer the angry surprise roused in him by the news of his sister's affection. If she had indulged in hopes she was deceived in them. Before the end of dinner she felt that her moderately smart dress was almost ridiculous. She had ordered the butler to open a bottle of champagne, and had intended at dessert to drink Felix's health. But when the fruit was handed round she looked at the two gloomy and abstracted faces on either side of her, and at first had not the courage to do it. The unwonted efforts she had made to start subjects of conversation during the meal had tired her physically and mentally, but she still patiently exerted herself to be bright and cheerful, and bravely struggled against the pain which the demeanour of her children set in her heart. The time came, however, when she could think of nothing more to say. Such invention as she had was exhausted. Margot scarcely

opened her lips. Felix could not be persuaded to take any interest in the affairs of the village and of the neighbours, or to relate any of his adventures in France. His mother's excursions into the realms of more formal and less intimate conversation, her mention of music, her allusion to a new book, were unattended by a better fortune. At last silence fell. Mrs. Wilding suppressed a sigh. The bubbles of champagne were winking at the brim of her glass. They recalled to her the gracious joy of yesterday, the exquisite anticipation of her son's arrival. Now he was here, cold, distant, almost hostile in his manner. Her mouth trembled, but she controlled herself and again sought for a topic of conversation. She could not find one, and the silence continued, broken by the bob-majors from the belfry. Margot, who had been eating a pear, finished it and laid down her knife and fork. There seemed nothing more to wait for. Mrs. Wilding looked at her glass again and summoned up her courage.

'I—I think we should drink your health to-night,' she said gently, looking at her son. 'Come, Margot.'

She lifted her glass, and with a smile that was very near to tears, sipped the champagne and bowed to Felix in the old-fashioned way. Margot, growing red, hesitated, and finally drank some wine too without looking at any one or saying a word. Felix compressed his lips, and tapped his hand, the fingers of which were tightly folded together, on the table.

'Oh, thanks, mater,' he murmured gruffly. 'You needn't bother.'

He seemed displeased by the little attention. Mrs. Wilding got up from the table.

'You will find a box of cigarettes on the sideboard,' she said. 'I got them from the stores. I hope they are what you like. The man told me gold-tipped cigarettes were the most popular, so I got those.'

'Oh, I expect they're all right. Thanks.'

Mrs. Wilding went into the drawing-room followed closely by Margot, and Felix sat down gloomily to smoke. The bells were still ringing. He felt suicidal. The whole atmosphere was antagonistic to him to-night. He longed to leave the house and the place at once. The thought of the railway station with its bustle and lights, of the whistle of the engine, of the rushing motion of the train, of the arrival on Dover pier, of the sight of the sea and the faint cliff-line of France, stirred in him a longing that was akin to the longing of a prisoner to escape from his cell. He was even amazed at the violence of the sensation that he was in a sort of prison, here in his home with his mother and

sister. He was no longer thinking about Mr. Bosanfield and Margot, but was concentrated upon himself. The ego which returned in him to Churston Waters was different from the ego which had gone in him to France. Surely it was quite different. The environment in which he had been born and brought up had become unsuited to him, or rather he must have become unsuited to it. His mother's little attentions at dinner had made him feel awkward and irritable. Her conversation had not roused in him any desire to talk. What did it all mean?

He listened to the bells. There were eight of them, and they were good ones, clear and powerful. He had always disliked their sound at night. Now he hated it. He connected them with churchy things and churchy people, with young ladies decorating a pulpit, with an organist practising hymns, with black-coated clergymen who hated priests, and talked of the right faith and the wrong, like Mr. Bosanfield. And he seemed like a man shut up in a box, unable to catch a glimpse of the great stretching life outside. Vaguely he longed for bigness—of action, of idea, conception, judgment. Was he not surrounded by the infinitely small? The conversation in the drawing-room at tea-time with the clergyman had been simply pitiable. Yet had his mother noticed, shrunk from the pitiableness of it? And Margot? Why, she was actually eager to draw closer to the pettiness from which he recoiled, to lose her identity in it. And his mother was apparently satisfied with her decision.

Felix wondered what his womenkind were really like. In the afternoon he had said to his mother that he would make Margot understand. What? His point of view. He began to realise the difficulty of performing that feat, and his depression deepened. The clock on the mantelpiece struck the half-hour after nine, and the butler looked in at the door to see if he could clear away. Felix got up reluctantly to go to the drawing-room. He found Margot reading a book, his mother doing some embroidery. As he came in Margot laid her book down. Because he had nothing to say and felt uncomfortable, Felix picked it up and glanced at the title. It was *Hints to Church Workers*, by *One of them*. He looked at the flyleaf. On it was written in a precise but niggling hand: 'To M. W., from Stephen Bosanfield.' He pressed his lips tightly together, and a sudden obstinacy rose up in him. He knew his sister's will was a weak one. He believed that his own was strong. He meant to find out how strong it was, but not to-night. The bells had ceased. It was very quiet in the low room, as quiet as in the little salon at

La Maison des Alouettes. He sat down by his mother. His new determination had suddenly banished his melancholy. Till bedtime he talked quite cheerfully, and Mrs. Wilding went upstairs to her room at half-past ten happier than she had been since her son's arrival.

She depended so entirely upon her children for her happiness that they could easily be her enemies, almost her destroyers.

In the morning Felix meant to deliver battle to his sister. The issue could surely not be doubtful. He had only to lay before her clearly, eloquently, some of the knowledge of life he had gained while he was in France. He had only to point out to her how impossible it was that she could know herself yet, or what her nature required to make it contented. As he undressed he felt quite buoyant. He had opened his window. Scents came in to him from the dark garden. The creepers raised their leaves above the window-sill as if to peep at him. They seemed like old friends. As he looked out he could see the yellow paths on which he had toddled as a child and leaped as a boy. They were faint threads in the gloom. He heard the deep voice of Mab barking in the yard, and the rattle of her chain. His mare, Mayflower, was doubtless munching comfortably in her warm loose-box. The church clock struck, and he remembered hearing it as a little boy, when he had waked in the dead hours of night. It had frightened yet fascinated him then. He had imagined a personality connected with it, some sleepless and melancholy being, that lived alone in the churchyard and did strange things when all the blinds were drawn in the village and no one walked along the roads. How often his mother had banished his fears, comforted him, explained things to him. She had known so much more than he did once. He knew so much more than she did now. So he believed. That was pathetic and almost monstrous. It occurred to him that, since their respective situations were now reversed, he ought to be tender to her ignorance as she had once been tender to his. On that thought he fell asleep.

The next morning was brilliantly fine, and the sight of the sunshine made Felix feel hard as the scents, the darkness, the sound of the church clock on the previous night had softened him and filled him with gentleness for the stupidities and narrowness of humanity. He went down to breakfast in a determined and rather pugnacious mood, and began the day by laughing at his mother's fear of sitting with the French window of the dining-room open. At eleven Margot and he decided to go out riding. He was astute, and did not give her a hint of

what was before her. His careless brotherly manner put her at her ease, and the breakfast was a far gayer meal than the dinner of the previous day had been. Mrs. Wilding, wrapped in her shawl—for Felix had carried his first point, and the window stood open—smiled happily behind the silver urn. The only wrinkle in her roseleaf was that Felix had not been down for family prayers on his first day at home, but she had no intention of alluding to it. After breakfast Felix said to his sister:

'How's your singing?'

'Oh, pretty well, I think. I've learnt several new German songs lately.'

'Have you been practising your exercises regularly?'

Margot hesitated, and began to look guilty.

'Not quite regularly.'

'How often?—Three times a week?'

'Hardly so often as that.'

'Have you ever practised them at all?'

'Sometimes.'

'Once a month, I suppose. Well, I must say!'

He went off to see the horses.

'You really ought to do your exercises oftener, Margot. Felix is quite right,' said Mrs. Wilding.

Margot, who had shown some inclination to grovel before her brother, suddenly shrugged her shoulders petulantly and made a clicking sound of intense irritation. She hated being 'spoken to' by any woman, even her mother, but could hardly be made angry, though she could be hurt, by a scolding from a man. She had never asked herself why this was. But self-examination was not a natural process to her. Going upstairs rather lethargically she went into the morning-room, reluctantly opened the piano, and set some music before her. When Felix came back from the stables he heard her singing scales, and smiled. The sound of those scales was a good augury for the further triumph of his will over his sister's.

When Margot and he were in the saddle a wave of complacent cheerfulness ran over him. He felt like a conqueror, as so many male nobodies do in their own homes. Mrs. Wilding watched them start from the hall door, and they were soon in the green shadow of the country lanes. Every bank and hedge, every cottage, almost every tuft of grass and clump of fern was familiar to Felix. The country people they met along the road saluted him with smiles and keen glances of curiosity. He noticed both with pleasure, and hugged himself in the thought that the real, the vital change that had taken place in him was

'Yes,' she replied in a secretive voice.

'And what were you talking about?' asked Mrs. Wilding, as they went into the dining-room.

'Oh, all sorts of things—serious things,' answered Felix in an off-hand voice.

His mother understood that youth loves to keep its secrets sometimes and said no more. She was far too dutiful to strive to pull down the barrier that stands between rising and sinking generations. When Felix found himself alone with her for a moment in the afternoon he said:

'Don't be too sure that Margot will marry that man Bosanfield, mater.'

Mrs. Wilding looked utterly astonished.

'But, Felix, she has promised to.'

'It isn't given out.'

'Surely that makes no difference.'

'All the difference in the world. I've been talking to her to-day.'

'But she loves him. She told me so.'

'I dare say she did. Margot's only a girl without a will of her own. She'd say anything a man asked her to say. You must know that.'

'But if she has changed her mind it is terrible. Think of that poor man.'

'Pooh! he'll get over it all right. A chap like that hasn't the sort of nature that dies for love. Let him marry a Sunday-school teacher.'

Felix spoke airily. He was revelling in this first definite exercise of his will. Mrs. Wilding was surprised by the hardness of his tone and manner. If what he said were true, and Margot were already wavering, it seemed to her that the whole family would be disgraced. Her son's flippant treatment of so serious a matter shocked her. She was on the point of expressing her emotion when she remembered her resolution made on the day of her husband's death, that henceforth she must not allow full play to all her woman's impulses, but must be broad-minded and serene, judging things as far as possible from the man's standpoint. Felix was growing up. Perhaps it was not in youths of his age to comprehend the tragedies of the affections. She must not blame him. But she felt that she ought to try and explain what she conceived to be the situation to him.

'Felix,' she said very gently, 'sit down for a moment.'

He flung himself down near her, looking gay and mischievous.

His dark eyes were shining, as hers never shone, with a light that was impudent in its vivacity.

'Now, mater, it's no use your holding a brief for the parson,' he exclaimed. 'He's old enough to take care of himself.'

'I am not holding a brief at all. I only wish that we should all do what is right and honourable. And I know you wish the same.'

'Of course. It would be jolly wrong and dishonourable for Margot to marry a fellow she wasn't really in love with. Now wouldn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Well, my blessed old mother, she's no more in love with Bosanfield than I am with Banbury Cross.'

'Are you sure, Felix?'

'Certain. Why, in half an hour I turned her right round and——'

'Yes, but you know that Margot is easily led, and that she never could resist you.'

Felix smiled complacently.

'She can be as obstinate as a mule when she likes. Look at her exercises. She won't practise them steadily whatever I say.'

'Ah, but that's a trifle. In important things she can't make up her mind.'

'Then I'll make it up for her. In fact I've done so, and I've decided that she has decided not to marry——'

'Mr. Bosanfield,' said the butler, opening the drawing-room door.

Both Mrs. Wilding and Felix flushed red. The clergyman came in calmly. Felix was struck by his complete self-possession. Though possibly narrow, he was certainly not weak. He looked at them both with his small, steady eyes, and evidently did not fail to note their confusion. Felix wondered whether it was his observation of their discomfort which led him to open the interview with a very startling remark.

'I thought it only right and proper,' he said, as he shook hands cordially with Mrs. Wilding, 'to take the first opportunity of furthering my acquaintance with your son in my new character. Yesterday, when I was here, he probably did not know that I am his future brother-in-law. To-day I have no doubt he does.'

He grasped Felix's hand and sat down beside him. Felix gasped. He felt as if he had received a stinging blow in the face. But even while he staggered under it he was aware of

CHAPTER VI

FELIX had returned from France feeling vaguely that the knowledge he had acquired there must make a considerable difference in his home relations. He had meant to show his mother and sister how simple they were; to make them, perhaps, self-conscious in their ignorance. He had laid plans, calm in the youthful certainty of his own superiority. That certainty he still possessed; but the plans were shattered by the introduction of Mr. Bosanfield into the family circle, and by the definite defeat he had inflicted upon Felix. For his marriage with Margot was assured from the moment when he gave battle openly to her brother. Margot, having been forced to take a line, showed unexpected firmness of purpose. Doubtless she was comfortably aware of the unyielding nature of her clerical ally, and also, as Felix soon perceived with wondering contempt, she was very much in love with Stephen Bosanfield, and showed her affection with a mingled shyness and pride which were transparently childish and countrified. She was, in truth, overwhelmed with humble surprise and gratification at finding herself loved. She had not dared to expect such a joy, having a most pitiful opinion of her attractions. The tender triumph that consequently invaded her soul enabled her even to brave the dissatisfaction of Felix with a certain wavering hardihood, once she had finally cast in her lot with the determined clergyman.

Mr. Bosanfield was very determined. Having routed the enemy in the first engagement, he lost no time in endeavouring to persuade Mrs. Wilding and Margot to fix the wedding day. Felix made no attempt at opposition. He would not enter into the matter at all, but kept himself entirely aloof from the question, much to his mother's distress. In vain she tried to draw him into the family conclave, to consult him as the man of the party who would naturally be looked to for a decision by the women. Felix replied curtly:

'Settle it all your own way, mater. I don't care what you

do. They can marry to-morrow as far as I'm concerned. It makes no difference to me.'

He isolated himself as much as possible at this time, was continually on horseback, and strove to live in himself and, by laying plans for the future, to get away from the present.

The future—that was his companion while he rode, singing to himself the silent songs of freedom. For as soon as Margot was married, he meant to tell his mother of his resolve to go to London and live there. Had it not been for the turmoil created in her simple life by Margot's engagement and the preparations for her marriage, Mrs. Wilding would no doubt have thought it her duty to discuss with Felix the subject of his career. Indeed, even in the midst of her preoccupation, she found time to think much and anxiously of her son. But his vexation at the marriage had rendered him so unapproachable that she timidly put off any discussion, lest she might seem desirous of forcing an intimacy which he seemed at present determined to avoid. Mrs. Wilding was exquisitely sensitive although she seemed so calm, so definitely English. Since his return her son had chosen to play the part of a stranger in his home. He treated his mother with formality, Margot with indifference. Mrs. Wilding excused his conduct with the passionate generosity of a mother, telling herself that it was really prompted by his affection for his sister, and consequent, almost angry, distress at the prospect of losing her. When the blow had fallen, when that which was now impending became an actual fact, she trusted, prayed, that Felix would resign himself with a good grace to the inevitable, and that at least she would feel at ease with him once more. At present she found herself foiled in every gentle attempt to draw near to him, to be to him what she had once been. All naturalness, all comprehension, all quiet cheerfulness had departed from their intercourse since the day when Mr. Bosanfield had established his position in the household as Margot's future husband.

In France Felix had meant to tell his mother of the change in him, to explain to her how it had been brought about. He had intended boldly to attack her ignorance with his knowledge. If he had done so Mrs. Wilding might possibly have been alarmed, and would most certainly have been worsted in argument. But at least she would have had the satisfaction of feeling that her son trusted her; that if he was changed, he wished her to comprehend his transformation. Margot's engagement kept him silent. He felt too hostile, too wronged, to speak. At this time he would rather have talked intimately

felt so tired that sometimes she could scarcely see the cards on which she was writing invitations, or the presents which she was taking out of their boxes and coverings.

Mr. Bosanfield was most dutifully affectionate to her. He always treated her with marked respect and solicitude, and sometimes irritated Felix by showing her an anxious politeness which set his own carelessness in an unfavourable light. He sprang to open the door when she was leaving the room; arranged a footstool for her feet when she sat down; put the icewool shawl carefully round her shoulders if she said that it seemed a little colder than usual—which she very often did; brought her the newspaper or sought for the book she was reading. She thanked him most gratefully. But how she wished that these little attentions had come from Felix. From him each one would have been a precious gift.

The intense feeling of reserve which dominated Felix through all this period prevented him from doing these very small and simple things, not because he thought them unnecessary—at heart he could not be anything but a gentleman—but because in doing them he would have had the sensation of drawing near to his mother. And something autocratic in his soul bade him be a solitary in this home which, he told himself, no longer suited him. The buzz of preparation which pervaded the house, a homely, eminently human buzz, had the same sort of effect on his mind as frost has on a flower. When he overheard his mother talking with the maids about the amount of table-linen that would be wanted for the wedding breakfast, or speaking to the butler about the silver, or the wine, to the gardener about the flowers for the decorations, to the cook about cakes and puddings, his lips curled with a sort of superior disgust at which he himself was faintly astonished. The atmosphere of the whole business was fiercely antagonistic to him. He longed to fight his way out of it all. He shut himself up for hours in his room, and plunged once more into the *Comédie Humaine*. But as he turned the pages of that murmuring book of life, he found himself longing for his old reading-place; for the ruined chapel in the garden of La Maison des Alouettes, the little, stealthy, busy insects moving patiently through their quivering minute jungle of creepers, the birds that perched on the arches of the shattered windows, even the sound of the Angelus bell. The bell of the yellow church across the road chimed. He heard it impatiently.

'Mary,' said his mother's voice somewhere in the house. 'Mary!'

'Yes, ma'am,' replied a servant's voice.

'How many of those damask napkins have you? We shall want——'

Felix stopped his ears.

'London—London—London,' he repeated through his teeth, shutting his eyes tightly.

In the darkness his will had made for him he saw again the great river at Tours, the dolls on its banks bending above their thin black lines, the crowded mass of tree-tops on the island where the music was. How fast the water ran between the arches. He heard again the bugle from the barracks, and, once more, all the beauties, the mysteries, the passions, and the sorrows of life seemed to flow together and to pass murmuring through his heart as the river passed murmuring through the arches of the bridge. And he longed with a vehemence that was fierce to get away from this house in which he was born, to go out—far, far out—and find beauty, mystery, passion, sorrow. It never occurred to him that possibly it is not always necessary to travel on distant roads to meet them face to face. His youth was fascinated by the idea of remoteness with which he connected romance. He chafed when the arrival of certain guests who were to stay in the house for the wedding obliged him to come out of his shell and play the part of host. But he endeavoured to console himself by the thought that now it would soon be over and he would be free.

On the night before the marriage there was a big family-dinner, to which, as well as various Wilding relations, and one of Mrs. Wilding's brothers, Stephen Bosanfield's father and mother were invited. Felix prepared to go down to it as an acidulated martyr to the stake. Poor Margot was in a condition of rather painful excitement and nervousness. She was, though so humble, exceedingly self-conscious, and her devouring anxiety to find adequate favour in the sight of Stephen's kith and kin rendered her at this juncture dewily agitated. As she dressed for dinner she felt that her personal appearance was most ridiculous, and that no energy of intellect or brightness of talent made amends in her for her extraordinary lack of beauty. How Stephen could have succeeded in caring about her amazed her more than ever. She greatly feared that his family would be even more astonished at his achievement than she was. Her round cheeks were flushed, and she was almost tearful with modesty when at length, after many meek and self-condemnatory looks into the glass, she turned to go to the drawing-room. On the landing outside her bedroom door she came suddenly upon her brother, who, immaculately dressed, was on the way down.

'Oh, Felix!' she said, starting.

'What's the matter?'

'I didn't know you were there.'

She saw his bright eyes fixed on her critically with a brother's look.

'Do I—do I look very bad?' she murmured.

'Bad? No, very nice.'

He spoke kindly. A sudden softness had come to him unexpectedly at the sight of his sister on this last evening of her maiden life. He looked into her intelligent, anxious brown eyes, and a number of confused, childish memories passed, tangled, through his mind swiftly. He remembered going out to pick periwinkles in spring with Margot; having the measles with Margot; playing at bears with her and an anæmic housemaid long since dead; being slapped by her for disobeying some autocratic command, given by her in very early days, when she was wont to presume on her more mature age ere she grew up into her present humble-mindedness. It was all over, that time.

'Dear old Margot,' he said in a low voice, still looking at her.

The dim, familiar landing seemed to him just then to be bathed in an atmosphere profoundly pathetic. They were both enveloped in it. Margot's round face worked. A sort of anxious hesitation, mingled with almost childlike pleasure, appeared on it. Two tears fell on her cheeks.

'Oh, Felix!' she said in a husky voice, 'I did so want—it's awful leaving you, and I thought you didn't mind.'

She kissed him awkwardly, but with a sort of passionate gratitude, then hurried back into her bedroom to try to recover herself before going downstairs. And, standing alone on the landing, Felix felt again, as he had felt one day in the garden, that there were mysteries hidden even in his own sister, that even such transparent simplicity as hers floated above strange, almost impenetrable reserves.

He went down slowly.

Mrs. Wilding was already in the drawing-room with two or three guests who were staying in the house: her brother, an Indian judge home on leave, handsome but sun-dried, with keen eyes and a slightly legal manner; his daughter, who was going to be a bridesmaid, but took the honour coolly; and a female cousin, devoted to good works, but singularly incapable of arranging her hair in any known, neat, or fashionable style. Mrs. Wilding's face was pale, and her soft eyes were full of

sadness and fatigue. But she made a brave effort to seem cheerful, and Felix did not notice anything amiss. He joined in the family talk, self-consciously dutiful, proud of his internal boredom. When Margot came in three or four minutes later she glanced at him with shy consciousness, but he did not look at her, and soon the arrival of her fiancé with his parents monopolised her attention, and threw her into an agony of deprecating vivacity.

Even in his first moment of fury against Margot's parson—as he called Stephen Bosanfield to himself contemptuously—Felix had not thought him otherwise than a gentleman, and his father and mother, though exceedingly, perhaps needlessly, respectable, were quite presentable.

His mother was rather markedly clerical. She had, no doubt, moved so perpetually in high Anglican circles that she felt priestly despite her sex and the homilies of St. Paul. Her husband, a capacious archdeacon, with a cathedral beard, though obviously an excellent and truly moral dignitary, was slightly less orthodox in appearance than his admirable wife. The sense of humour denied to his son was apparent in his gently twinkling eyes.

Stephen Bosanfield was calm, precise, intent as ever. Evidently he was not a man to be upset by so correct an incident as a marriage, even though it was his own. Felix glanced at him with some amazement. His decent phlegm was really almost impressive at such a time. It was quite unnecessary for Margot to be so anxious about herself since her lover was so obviously convinced of the excellence of his choice. Yet she was anxious. At this moment she was busily engaged in smiling nervously, yet hopefully too, at her future father-in-law, who, with benign urbanity, was giving her certain directions for the keeping of Stephen in proper order. Felix heard his gentlemanly bass voice saying:

'You must not let him run wild about the parish on any account.'

'Margot's reply was hasty and voluble, and complicated by ingratiating laughter. The archdeacon evidently understood her nervousness and forgave it. Mrs. Wilding and Mrs. Bosanfield, sitting side by side on a sofa, were conversing amicably. The latter had jet-black hair arranged in glossy bands, a brick-red complexion like her son's, and prominent eyes that looked ritualistic. Her mouth was very small and her lips pouted, giving to her face a slight expression of peevishness, as if she wanted to scold some one. She had been born in a cathedral

nothing in common, and judged any effort to draw near to her, or to be entertaining in her conversational mode, foredoomed to failure. She sipped her soup in a very practical manner, nipping the spoon tightly, and keeping the little finger of her right hand stiffly extended.

'Do you intend to enter the church?' she inquired, rolling her prominent eyes round the table in a glance that seemed to demand forthwith their final confession from those she looked at.

'To-morrow? of course. I am going to give my sister away,' returned Felix in amazement.

He had not been able to get out of this very uncongenial duty, although he had only agreed to perform it with cold ungraciousness.

'You don't grasp my meaning,' said Mrs. Bosanfield with a brief and patronising smile. 'I intended to ask if you were going to take orders.'

'I! Oh, dear no!' said Felix, speaking rather loudly in the shock of his surprise at any one supposing such a thing possible. A second later he realised that of course Mrs. Bosanfield knew nothing whatever of him or of his character. There was more than a shade of disapproval in the glance she now cast at him. So many of her relations had become clergymen, and she had moved so perpetually in clerical society all her life, that Felix's exclamation, conveying as it did a hint of contempt, struck her as wellnigh sacrilegious.

'You do not feel able for it, I conceive,' she remarked, pouting her lips to a glass of sherry.

'I'm afraid I should not be very successful as a clergyman,' said Felix, recovering his equanimity. 'I doubt if I could preach.'

'Preaching is not everything a clergyman has to do,' said Mrs. Bosanfield educationally.

'Oh no, of course not,' Felix assented, inclined to wish it the one thing no clergyman ever had to do under any circumstances.

'Stephen is an excellent preacher,' continued Mrs. Bosanfield, placing her fish-knife and fork neatly side by side on her plate, and tucking in her chin. 'I shall not be surprised if they make him a bishop in the end. Very fortunate for your sister if it should prove so.'

'Very. I do hope it may,' replied Felix.

He often imitated unconsciously. If he saw any one frequently make an odd gesture he could scarcely help reproducing

it. And now, in replying to Mrs. Bosanfield's ambitiously pious aspiration, without being aware of it, he adopted her clipping, yet churchy mode of speech. She stared at him for a moment attentively, then said, 'Time will show,' in a finishing manner, turned to the rector of the parish, who was on her other side, and began to pronounce authoritatively on the special qualities necessary to the making of a successful missionary to the Chinese.

For a moment Felix sat looking straight before him down the table. He caught a glimpse of his mother's white hair between the silver candlesticks and the red roses. She was talking to Mr. Ismey, whose melancholy eyes were turned in his direction. Her son guessed that she was saying something about him, and wondered what it was—not that it mattered. He felt strangely detached from all these family doings, almost as if he were a changeling dropped down into this room, familiar though it was to him. Margot was speaking eagerly yet shyly to Stephen Bosanfield, occasionally darting conscious glances at the other guests to see if they were noticing her—adversely, no doubt. Her fiancé was eating some sweetbread with calm precision, like a man fulfilling a duty with the unimpassioned dexterity that comes of long thought and practice. As Felix glanced at him he indulged in his favourite trick of moving his ears. Felix set his lips together and stared hard at him, seized by a sort of angry fascination. He saw Margot married to those ears, living with them for the rest of her days, his sister with whom he was so intimate, and yet whom surely he scarcely knew at all. A sort of perplexity overcame him. The phantasmagoria of human relations rendered him dizzy. What do we all mean to each other? He wondered. Everything and nothing.

'Won't you speak to me at all?' said a drawling clear voice.

He started. Mrs. Ismey was looking at him with a half-smile.

'I beg your pardon.'

'You feel very much out of it, don't you?' she continued.

Felix felt confused, but when he met her odd, yellowish eyes he was conscious of a sense of *camaraderie*, and thought that if he got to know this stranger well he could be very much at his ease with her.

'What makes you think so?' he asked, lowering his voice.

'Know so, you mean.'

'Oh, but you can't know, Mrs. Ismey.'

He began confidently, ended with diffidence.

'You disapprove of family functions, so do I. Uneasy

'Are you ever serious?'

'Never at a family-dinner. On such an occasion frivolity is one's only salvation.'

Felix saw an opening here to ask a question that had been puzzling him a good deal.

'May I—d' you mind my asking you something?' he said.

'No—so long as it isn't my age,' she replied.

'Mrs. Ismey! As if I should——'

'You recognise that my maturity puts such an idea out of court. Well, what is it?'

'Are you Stephen Bosanfield's old friend?'

'What do you suppose?'

'Why—that your husband is.'

'Yes. His mother was an intimate of Mrs. Bosanfield's, and was devoted to your future brother-in-law. My husband and he have been quite like relations all their lives. So here we are, down from London to bless the nuptials.'

'You live in London!' said Felix with deep interest.

'Of course, Green Street, Park Lane. Don't you know who my husband is?'

'No. Ought I to? You see, I'm a—we're awfully out of everything here.'

'Are you? Still, I suppose books penetrate even to this remote region—thirty miles, isn't it, from the metropolis?'

'Books!' exclaimed Felix with growing excitement. 'Is he an author?'

'Heaven forefend! I don't want to leave Green Street for West Kensington. Haven't you heard of Ismey the publisher?'

'Ismey—of course!'

'Well, we are Ismey. Impressive, isn't it?'

To Felix it was very impressive, but, meeting her humorous eyes, he suddenly did not care to acknowledge that, to him, it was an event to meet the head of a great publishing-house; one who must be in perpetual and close relations with those mysterious beings who, like Balzac, created populations and played upon the hearts and imaginations of the world. Still, he could not quite stifle his excitement and curiosity, though he did his best to control them.

'Then I suppose you know a great many writers?' he said, trying to speak indifferently.

'Oh yes—far too many.'

'Too many?'

'They seldom shine in conversation.'

'Still, you know they are clever.'

'My dear boy! what do you mean?'

She was smiling mischievously over her square of tablecloth, on which was no plate. Now she opened her fan and began to use it rhythmically.

'What do you mean?' she repeated.

Felix felt a little nettled.

'Why, that they've got brains, of course,' he exclaimed.

'The power of moving a pen, often ungrammatically, over foolscap does not always imply that. But are you a worshipper of lion-cubs?'

'I don't know. I mean I've never met any, but I certainly have—well, I suppose you'd call it worshipped some one who wrote.'

'And who's been nice enough to stop writing?'

'He's dead,' Felix said abruptly.

Suddenly his imagination flew back to Tours, and he saw the statue in the twilight. He forgot to be sensitive any more in the presence of this cynical observer. His self-consciousness departed, driven out by the real enthusiasm that burnt like a fire within him whenever he thought of the magician who had opened to him the gates of the world. And, turning on Mrs. Ismey with sparkling eyes, he said almost defiantly:

'And I do worship him, whether you laugh at me or not.'

The smile on her lips became suddenly less satirical and much more kind.

'Who is it?' she asked quite gently.

'Balzac,' said Felix. 'I've been living in France, you know, near Tours.'

'The very land of the magician!' she said with vivacity. 'That accounts for it.'

'For what?' asked Felix.

'Oh, many things; why it struck me as so strange that you should be the son of this house for one. So you love Balzac. Which of his books have you read?'

'All of them.'

She examined him with an attention that seemed profound.

'All? How old are you?'

'Twenty.'

'And how much of life have you seen—actually seen for yourself?'

Felix looked a little shamefaced.

'How much? Oh, well—scarcely any, I suppose. I've just been to school—Rugby—and here, and in France—quite in the country.'

matter,' said Stephen, finishing his glass of water, and dabbing his lips with a napkin.

Felix was on the point of saying brusquely, 'No, I shan't,' but he checked himself in time.

'Of course, when the moment comes, I shall talk it over with her,' he said.

'The advice of such a mother could not but be invaluable,' continued Stephen, placing the napkin, neatly folded together, on the table and clasping his hands across his chest.

This second remark irritated Felix so much that he could not resist his inclination to show his vexation.

'Even the best woman in the world may not be able to judge for a man,' he said rather hotly.

'You think not? Well, all I can say is that I would rather take my mother's opinion on a point than that of any one I know,' returned Stephen equably.

'Surely it depends on what the point is,' said Felix.

But here Mr. Ismey broke in gently and turned the conversation into another channel. Nevertheless, when the men got up to go into the drawing-room, Felix was still fuming, hot with a most useless resentment against the unimpassioned priest.

They found Mrs. Bosanfield seated on the sofa beside Margot, quite evidently engaged in probing to its depths the character of her future daughter-in-law, who in an obsequious attitude, and with eyes that begged frantically for a favourable verdict, was replying with uneasy volubility to her searching questions. Mrs. Wilding and Mrs. Ismey were sitting together at a little distance. The latter looked decidedly bored, and turned round eagerly to welcome the arrival of the men. Felix went up to her at once. He remembered afterwards that all the other people in the room seemed to him like pale shadows from which she stood out with an extraordinary sharp clearness and meaning. His mother smiled at him gently. There was a sort of pleading for some filial attention in her great, soft eyes, but he did not notice it. Mr. Ismey and Stephen began to talk to her. Mrs. Ismey got up.

'What dear old-fashioned lattice-windows you have here,' she said.

She moved towards the farther one, which was partly open. Felix followed her. As she passed a mirror he saw that she turned her head and glanced into it quickly. Reaching the window, she put her right hand on the sill and looked out.

'There's moonlight,' she said. 'And, oh, what a delicious garden!'

Felix suddenly felt proud of his home.

'Do you like it?' he asked, standing beside her.

The thick yew hedge that grew along the high bank of the sunken road looked as black as ebony in the night, and almost as unyielding. The short grass of the smooth lawn, which stretched from it to the narrow path of pale-yellow gravel that ran by the house, was silvered by the moon and chequered by the steady shadows of the tall old trees. There was no wind, not even the lightest breeze. The outline of the church, where Margot would be married on the morrow, was defined against the cloudless, black-purple, night sky. Bats were wheeling about. They came swiftly out of the obscurity of the trees, slanted downwards across the radiance of the moonlight, circled round, and returned into the darkness, as if disappointed in some anxious, perpetual quest which could only be followed surreptitiously.

'Would your mother think me very unconventional if I asked to go out into that paradise just for a moment?' said Mrs. Ismey, half turning towards Felix, still with one hand on the window-sill.

'No. Oh, do come out!' he answered eagerly. 'I should love to show you the garden.'

Because she called it a paradise he felt that indeed it was one.

'Mother,' he exclaimed, 'Mrs. Ismey wants to see the garden.'

'What, dear?' said Mrs. Wilding, stopping in her talk with Mr. Ismey and Stephen Bosanfield.

'May I just have a peep into your garden?' said Mrs. Ismey, coming down the room. 'It looks like enchanted ground to-night.'

'But aren't you afraid of catching cold?' said Mrs. Wilding. 'It's always so damp at night.'

'Nonsense, mater—damp! Why, it's as dry as a bone.'

'I'm impervious to cold. Am I not, Francis?' said Mrs. Ismey to her husband.

'I dare say,' he answered gravely.

'Well, do put on my shawl, at any rate,' said Mrs. Wilding, with the most genuine solicitude.

Felix saw Mrs. Ismey look at its thin blackness with humorous dismay, but she took it at once and put it over her shoulders.

'There!' she said. 'Now I'm safe. Thank you so much. Which way is it?'

'I'll show you,' said Felix eagerly.

He was longing to be out in the silence of the garden, and

which began slowly to strike ten. They both listened till it ceased. Felix stole a glance at his companion's face. He could not see it very well. The shadow was too deep. But it seemed to him that there was an expression of uneasiness or of acute impatience on it. Yet that there should be was so unlikely that he thought he must be mistaken. Doubtless the shade of the yew-tree threw a strangeness upon her. When she spoke again he felt quite certain it was so, for her voice was light and composed as ever.

'I like uncertain people,' she said. 'And I believe women often do. They are attracted most by men on whom they can't rely. It's part of their general supreme idiocy.'

'Oh, I say—you are hard on them, though.'

He glanced at her again, and again her eyes seemed to him almost fierce with some desire, some anxiety. This time he could not convince himself that he was tricked by the darkness, and he began to feel uncomfortable, almost nervous. And now, too, he thought, perhaps led by his nerves, that there was an echo of Mrs. Ismey's face in her voice—the thing heard repeating the significance of the thing seen.

'We are idiots,' she said. 'We prove it by our actions every day, every hour, by our marriages and our breaking of them, our faith and our suspicions, our fickleness and our absurd clinging to gods with whole bodies of clay as well as feet, our renunciations and our—the things we seize on.'

She had put up one hand to her neck, and she now let it slide softly over her bosom to the edge of her low bodice, pushing her fingers down a little below the stuff.

'Oh, Mr. Wilding,' she said, 'I wish you would just go and look in for a moment at the window. I've got a sudden ridiculous desire to know what they are all doing.'

'Of course I'll go,' Felix answered, a good deal surprised.

The request was so very abrupt, and rather odd, too, he thought. He got up and went towards the window. While he was going, some impulse made him turn round to look back across the moonlit grass at his companion, and he saw her bend down swiftly, eagerly, without getting up from the bench. The moon shone for a moment on her hair as she threw her head forward in making the movement. Felix turned away and went on. He had an odd idea that she had got rid of him intentionally for an instant. But why? There was a sort of passion in the vitality of the movement he had just seen. It aroused a strong burning curiosity in him. So sure did he feel that—why, he could not imagine—Mrs. Ismey had only sent him to

the window in order to be alone, that he scarcely looked in. He waited for two or three minutes on the path and then returned slowly. She was leaning against the back of the seat, not quite languidly, but as if she were expectant of a languor which had not yet come upon her. She did not fail to question Felix about the family-party, and so minutely that he began to suppose his suspicion had been wrong, and that she had really been inquisitive as to the proceedings in the drawing-room. He answered as best he could.

'Oh, you've dropped that blessed old shawl,' he said presently.

'No, have I?'

He picked it up.

'Yes. I suppose it was when you leant forward.'

'I!'

He thought her voice sounded sharp.

'Yes,' he said. 'Just after I started to go to the window.'

'Oh, of course. I wanted to feel whether the grass was damp. What your mother said, you know. It was quite dry.'

Felix touched the lawn with his left hand, which was on the side away from Mrs. Ismey. There was dew on it. They sat in silence for several minutes. She seemed to have lost some of her vivacity, and Felix was plunged in an excitement of thought which led him down blind alleys. The sound of a chord struck on the piano in the drawing-room startled him. It seemed intensely artificial heard out of doors. Mrs. Ismey moved slightly on the seat. A bat crossed the space of moonlight in front of them, descended, and flew round and round close to the grass. The sound of the piano continued, and then Margot's voice was audible. She sang a few notes and was joined by a tenor. She and Stephen Bosanfield were uniting in a most domestic English duet. The latter sang neatly and with some skill. Margot's quality of voice was deliciously pure. But there was an absence of passion, of excitement, which irritated Felix at this moment. He did not stop to think that any violence would have been unsuitable imposed upon the very respectable composition they were interpreting. Selfishly he craved for a volume of sound that would fit in with, or interpret, his mental condition. He would have liked a languid and mysterious air, —Indian, perhaps—growing gradually into excitement like a cleverly written story. The English words, which he could hear distinctly, worried him. They were so quietly and unmeaningly sentimental, so humdrum in their decent baldness. But no doubt they were very correct, fitting the occasion. Indeed, he presently began to think that they were mildly

Margot kissed her brother. The tears were running down her face.

'Good-night, dear Felix,' she whispered. 'Thank—thank you for everything.'

'God bless you, my boy,' said his mother, also kissing him. 'I pray that some day you may be happy in the same way as Margot.'

Felix put his arms round her, thinking of his dead father, of all his mother had lost. Her pure and perfect unselfishness went home to him just then. It hurt him, and made him wonder if he would ever have the courage and the nobility, when his time of the joys of youth was past, to lead a new life in the hearts of others. He did not believe he could. The idea even held something horrible to him. He went out and left his mother and sister together. And he shut the door softly, as men shut the door of a shadowy church when they leave it.

CHAPTER VII

TWO days had passed since Margot's wedding. Mrs. Wilding and Felix were alone in Hill House. Their guests having gone, they were able fully to realise what sort of gap the departure of Margot had left in their lives. Felix felt that the gap in his was unexpectedly large. In his home he was quite lost without his sister. He had never known Hill House without her. She had always been very much at his service. He had been accustomed to hear her clear voice singing in the mornings, to ride with her, to scold her, to stir her up. Her very laziness had become dear to him. He knew it now, and missed that which had daily aggravated him. What his mother missed he did not think about. He was wholly intent upon himself, wholly resolved to get away as soon as possible from this altered house, in which there was an atmosphere which made him think unpleasantly of age, and of the changes brought by passing years.

The last thing Mrs. Ismey had said to him, before she drove away after the departure of the bride and bridegroom, had been:

'*Au revoir*, Mr. Wilding. Come to see us in London if you are ever there. We shall be settled in Green Street by the first week in October.'

He could still recall her exact expression as she spoke, turning sideways in the carriage, her eyes sparkling with pleasure at the prospect of escaping from a function that must have bored her very much. She was dressed in pale blue, with a blue-and-white hat which Felix thought most marvellously impertinent, and she looked rather like a beautifully arranged doll prepared for a bazaar. But, when she smiled, her face held nothing of the petulant vacancy of a doll. Mr. Ismey at her side seemed almost inappropriately melancholy. He was very kind, however, and echoed her invitation with meaning.

'Yes, come and see us,' he said. 'And if I can do anything for you in town I shall be glad to. You are Stephen's brother-

'You don't think you could write best in the quiet of the country?'

'No, mater, I don't. You forget I've got to see life, to know men and women. But you don't understand, and I can't explain. You see you've never had the chance of knowing much about things. It's different for women, some women. Of course there are people like Mrs. Ismey.'

'Do you think they are the happiest women?' said his mother.

'Oh, I don't know that happiness is the one aim of life,' said Felix airily.

He stopped, then added abruptly:

'I say, mater, d'you like Mrs. Ismey?'

Mrs. Wilding hesitated a moment. Then she answered, trying to put some cordiality into her voice:

'I like her well enough.'

'That means you don't like her,' cried Felix hotly. 'I knew you didn't. I felt it.'

'I don't dislike her at all,' she replied, very gently. 'I scarcely know her. She is very kind and pleasant, and very amusing.'

'Oh, don't try to get out of it, mater. You'd never hit it off with her. She'd shock you, of course.'

'I dare say she would find my company very dull. I have lived so quietly that I suppose I seem behind the times. She is a clever woman, probably, and accustomed to be with clever people.'

'I want to be with clever people,' said Felix. 'And for that I must go to London.'

Mrs. Wilding took up her knitting again and bent over it. A dull red flush appeared on her face and spread to her neck. Still keeping her eyes down she said, with a sort of delicate attempt at being off-hand:

'There are a few months till you come of age, Felix.'

'Yes, I know,' he answered, with impatience. 'Oh, I do wish I was twenty-one to-day.'

'I think that—I dare say it is trying for you to lose Margot and to see her in possession of her money before you are. I—I should not like you to feel as if I were standing in your way at all, and so you can have the use of such money as you need for any reasonable purpose. I believe your father would have wished that.'

'Oh, mater!'

An emotion he could hardly have defined or explained surged

into the boy's heart. Oddly enough it was half painful. Yet there was an exultant joy in it too.

'I hope and think I can trust my son not to make any evil use of his father's gift,' Mrs. Wilding added, in a low voice.

'Mater, you are a brick,' said Felix.

His voice was husky for a moment. Indeed, he felt suddenly as if he could cry.

'I must go and have a smoke in the garden,' he exclaimed.

He rushed off into the darkness. When he was gone some tears dropped among some dropped stitches. The long drawing-room, the world, were very lonely to the mother. She wondered whether she was doing right, whether she ought to withhold the money till Felix was of age. She was full of fears for him in his freedom. Perhaps she was weak, but the sensation of standing in his way by an exercise of authority, of knowing him kept unwillingly at her side by lack of the means to leave her, hurt her horribly. She shrank under this idea as under a blow. Felix wished to go away from her and to stay away from her. Yet he had only just returned after a long absence. It was that absence which had given him his new taste for living his life without her. A secret wound bled in Mrs. Wilding, but she had not a moment of unkind, even of sore feeling against her boy. She kept on telling herself that all this was natural, inevitable. But that night, when she was alone in her bedroom, she pressed her face against her pillow and cried long and silently. And she wondered in her heart-sickness why—? Why are life, love, youth as they are? She wondered till her head throbbed and ached, and the tears were burnt up as if by a fever flaming behind her eyes.

In his room Felix, too, lay awake and saw in the darkness the glad processions of London, arranged, perhaps, by a Parisian master of ceremonies, dressed by Parisian costumiers. Mrs. Ismey walked in them as one very sure of herself. He was there too. But not his mother, not Margot, not Stephen Bosanfield. What a strange and varied crowd it was. From the houses on either side people looked out and showered down flowers. And Felix thought that his name was on their lips.

He forgot one book of Balzac, the first that he had looked into—*Illusions Perdues*. But if he had remembered it he would have felt no fear of the future just then. The world had been made for him as woman was made for man—sometimes to be man's mother.

The first week in October found the leaves being swept from the trees by an autumn gale and Felix in London.

musicians, painters, authors, actors, a happy coterie of intellectual and Bohemian creatures crammed with talent and with *bonhomie*. But his mother, also vaguely, thought ill of the neighbourhood. She was sure she had heard that it was either unhealthy or wicked, she was not sure which. Finally, since Felix would not hear of entering a family, she suggested writing to Mr. Ismey, to ask his advice. By this time Margot and Stephen Bosanfield were settled in the rectory house at Frankton Wells, and Stephen said he was sure his friend would be delighted to help in the matter. Felix at first shrank from the idea of owing anything to Stephen. On the other hand, he was fascinated by the notion of getting into communication with the Ismeys. The latter feeling triumphed. The letter was written by Mrs. Wilding under the close supervision of Felix and sent. After an interval of a few days an answer came from Mr. Ismey, who was in France at a *plage*. It was cordial. He suggested Felix's looking at some small flats he knew of in Victoria Street, at Wellington Mansions, asked what profession he was going to take up, whether he meant to read for the bar, to go into business, or what. Felix persuaded his mother to let him reply to this letter, and in his answer could not prevent more than a hint of his secret ardour for fame and an artistic life appearing. He wrote, in fact, like an enthusiastic boy glowing at the prospect before him. At the end he ventured to send a message of remembrance to Mrs. Ismey. A second letter speedily arrived from Mr. Ismey, and one that set Felix's heart beating fast. It suggested that Felix was as yet very young for the writer's career, that it would probably be some time before he could make his way—if indeed he were destined to succeed in doing so, on which Mr. Ismey was not in a position to pronounce any opinion—and that, in the meanwhile, perhaps he would like to have some employment which would at least bring him to the portals of the temple of literature, and in which he might make acquaintances likely to be of service to him hereafter. If this were so, Mr. Ismey told him to call at the publishing-office when he came to London, and added that there might be some post vacant there which he could fill.

When he had laid down this communication Felix felt as if his dearest wishes were on the point of fulfilment. But a thought still more exciting and inspiring rushed into his mind. He divined the influence of Mrs. Ismey in the letter. Then, though she had laughed at him, she had seen that he was not quite stupid, not quite ordinary. She had some faith in him. A rapture of self-confidence filled him. He felt like a conqueror. When his mother had seen the letter she rejoiced too. She had

been much afraid of Felix's going to London with no definite occupation in prospect. Dreadful accounts of the fates meted out to idlers in great cities had recurred to her mind and thrilled her with alarm. Now there was a reason for her son's departure. He was to work, to be under supervision. She felt greatly comforted. A small furnished flat was found in Wellington Mansions. It cost three guineas a week, and service was included. This would do for a beginning. Later on Felix might take and furnish a flat of his own if he found that a London life really suited him. The beginning of October came, and with it the moment for the plunge. Then it was that Mrs. Wilding announced her intention of accompanying her son to London.

'I can stay at the Grosvenor Hotel for one night,' she said, 'and settle you in.'

Felix protested quickly. He scarcely knew why. It was not entirely because he did not wish to have his mother with him for that first London evening. Indeed, now that the moment for his *début* had arrived, he was angrily aware of a slightly sickening sensation of melancholy at the prospect of living for the first time quite alone. But he remembered Mrs. Ismey's words, that this *début* would be 'eccentric and superb.' Now there is nothing eccentric and superb in travelling to town with one's mother, dining with her in an hotel coffee-room, and being 'settled in' by her with maternal injunctions and advice as to the avoidance of draughts, the keeping of early hours, and the eating of wholesome and nourishing food. So Felix protested. Yet he did so half-heartedly. He was surprised to find that he secretly wanted his mother to come, that there was something in him which, at this moment, stretched out hands as if to cling to her. His consciousness of this desirous, clinging, childish thing —a soul within his soul—made him feel very reserved and shy with her as they journeyed up to London together. He hardly spoke to her at all, but read papers or looked out of the window. His good-bye to Margot and Stephen Bosanfield at the rectory had been quite cordial. Margot seemed supremely happy as a married woman, although very self-conscious in her new state. Stephen, too, seemed rather less dry since he had become a husband, and Felix now felt bound to accept him as one of the family. Besides, he appeared at present in a more important light. The boy could not help thinking of him as the intimate friend of Mr. Ismey, could not fail to understand that the clergyman was not above returning good for evil. He had expressed the greatest gratification at Mr. Ismey's proposi-

in uniform opened the cab door and touched his peaked cap. Felix nodded, and jumped out with an effort at nonchalance. He did not offer to help his mother although he wanted to. He looked sideways at the man in uniform and took out his purse.

'I'll pay, Felix,' said Mrs. Wilding.

She had the money ready and gave it to the cabman. He looked at it and said it was not enough. Felix hastily gave him another shilling. The luggage was taken down, and the attendant pushed back a sliding-door, pressed a button, and showed a small lift lit by electricity.

'Oh, I can't go in that,' said Mrs. Wilding hastily.

'Nonsense, mater! Do get in!'

'No, I couldn't.'

'There's no danger, mum,' said the attendant, concealing a grin with his hand.

'Get in, mater. Everybody uses——'

But fear gave Mrs. Wilding firmness.

'I'd much rather walk,' she said.

And she turned and began slowly to mount the narrow and curving stone staircase.

'I suppose the lady ain't accustomed to London, sir,' said the attendant to Felix.

'Yes, that is—yes, no.'

He pursued his mother and caught her up.

'Mater,' he said, 'I do wish to goodness you wouldn't go on like this. You make me ridiculous, and I have to live here. You might remember that.'

Mrs. Wilding stopped for a moment. She was very pale.

'I am very sorry, Felix,' she said. 'I dare say I am very foolish.'

'Yes, you are,' he answered, almost brutally.

He was tingling, and felt sure the lift-man was laughing at them both. They reached the third floor, and entered the flat in silence. The attendant had turned on the light in the passage and sitting-room. The luggage was quickly brought up by a strong-looking lad in shirt-sleeves, and deposited in the bedroom. Mrs. Wilding's bag was set down in the passage. She had walked to the sitting-room window and was looking out into the darkening court, round which appeared lights from the windows of other flats. Tears made them seem blurred and confused to her. Then they all ran together and went out.

'You want tea, mater, don't you?'

With a great effort Mrs. Wilding forced herself to reply in a steady voice:

'Thank you, Felix.'

She turned round and sat down on the small sofa, taking off the icewool shawl and unfastening her cloak, while Felix ordered the tea. The man went away.

'I 'll just go and see to the luggage,' Felix said.

He went out to the bedroom leaving his mother alone. A black melancholy was on him. Instead of the exultation he had expected to feel on taking possession of his London home, he was conscious only of misery and desolation. He hated himself for his rudeness to his mother. He longed to throw his arms round her, to kiss her and beg her pardon. Yet he could more easily have thrown himself out of the window and dashed out his brains against the asphalt of the court. Why? He did not know. There were within him mysterious forces which he obeyed. As yet he was too young to sit down and marvel at or try to defy them. After waiting a few minutes in the bedroom he pulled himself together and went back to the sitting-room, resolved to be pleasant and cheerful and play the host in a right spirit. The tea-tray was already there on a table against the wall, and his mother was sitting near. She smiled at him as he came in, and a sort of passion of wonder at the simple, unerring goodness of her nature swept through his soul. But he still felt shy at entertaining her and could think of nothing to say. She insisted on his pouring out the tea, and declared it was very good. They sat opposite to one another. Mrs. Wilding looked about the little room and made some comments on it. Certainly it was not at all ugly. There were a piano, a sofa, a large divan under a white bookcase, a writing-bureau, two good-sized armchairs. The walls were pale green with a white dado, and a shelf on which were ranged a number of blue-and-white china plates. Several good engravings hung below them, and some prints of hunting and coaching scenes in the old days before the railways. Above the bureau squatted some grotesque Chinese idols. They were rickety and had bits of folded paper stuck under them to preserve their equilibrium. On a little table stood a number of old silver dishes, pincers, snuffers, and boxes. The electric lights burned brightly and there was a small fire on the hearth.

'When you have put out your photographs it will look quite homelike,' said Mrs. Wilding, with an attempt at cheerfulness which was pathetic.

Felix felt a lump rise in his throat.

'What a contemptible fool I am!' he thought

'Have some more tea, mater?' he muttered.

'No, thank you.'

There was a silence, through which crept the distant hum of damp London.

'Well, I suppose I ought to be going,' said Mrs. Wilding at length. 'You will want to unpack.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

She began to spread out her cloak.

'Perhaps I could help you?' she suggested, almost timidly.

'Oh, no thanks. It would tire you.'

'Then I'll go to the hotel and rest a bit before dinner. What time would you like to dine?'

'Oh—well, eight, I s'pose.'

She put on her cloak and got up.

'I say, mater,' Felix said suddenly, 'the electric light makes people look awfully white, doesn't it?'

'Yes, I suppose it does. I hope it is good for the eyes. May I just peep into your bedroom?'

'Oh yes, do. It's all right—jolly small, of course.'

She went out into the passage.

'I hope the drains are good,' she said anxiously.

'Sure to be.'

'If you notice anything you must tell me, and I will have a man——'

'Now, mater, I won't have you spending a halfpenny on me, after giving me all this money before the time!'

Tears—were they, could they be of gratitude?—came into her eyes. She said nothing, looked into the bedroom, felt the mattress and the sheets, and cast a long look round. Here her boy was going to sleep, far away from that long, sweet-smelling room in which she slept, that room in which, when he was a little child, she had so often heard in the night his humble little pipe: 'mother'—or perhaps 'father'—'I thought I heard a noise!' Her heart ached with longing for the past when he depended entirely upon her. Now he was her gift to this huge city. As she stood there, her hand on the coverlet of the bed, she felt as if she were all a living prayer for him. He, too, stood by the door looking at her. What was he thinking just then?

'I'll ring for the servant, mater. He'll get you a cab and take down your bag. But of course I'll come down and see you safely out.

'Oh no. It's such a long way.'

'Rot. I can come up in the lift. I'm not nervous.'

He forced a laugh. It was difficult, for that was really his hidden apology.

'I shall stick your photograph up in the middle of the mantelpiece,' he added, and cleared his throat.

Mrs. Wilding looked at him and pulled down her veil over her face.

After a rather silent dinner in the coffee-room of the Grosvenor Hotel that evening, Felix set out to walk to his flat. It was no longer raining, but the ground glistened with wet under the rays of the lamps. The roads were muddy. All the people who were walking, except the poorest and the soldiers, carried unfolded umbrellas ready for use. At the corner, by Victoria, the omnibuses were disgorging their loads, the newsboys were hoarsely crying false news of a sensational nature, pedestrians were hurrying to catch their trains, and strange and evil-looking loiterers were waiting about, intently watching the darkness as if each moment they expected it to bring them some horrid gift.

Felix looked eagerly at the sordid pageant of the misty night. It seemed to him both dreary and exciting, full of possibilities which were vague but which stirred his imagination like music. He had come out from the hotel in a highly strung, nervous mood. Just before he started his mother had said a few words —she thought such as a father would have considered it his duty to say in similar circumstances—about the dangers that encompass a lonely life in a great city. For a moment Felix was secretly amused. Did he not know them all in the pages of Balzac? But the amusement faded almost at once in an emotion which seemed to prove him still a child at heart. When he said good-night to his mother, and she wished him happiness, success, goodness in his new life—wished them rather falteringly in the hall of the hotel—a sense of fear and of desertion overcame him. He put on his coat, took his hat and umbrella, and watched her—having again refused to trust herself to the machinations of a lift—slowly going up the broad staircase to her numbered bedroom. Her well-known figure looked oddly out of place in that caravansary, and the new loneliness of her life suddenly came home to him. He felt like a deserter. She reached the first landing, looked down over the balustrade and smiled at him. And again he thought how terribly white people become under electric lights. There were two or three German-Swiss waiters standing about, and he made a rather self-conscious and shame-faced gesture of farewell. His mother disappeared down the corridor. She took away a good deal with her. He felt that, and went out into the night rather like a lost child. Then the excitement of his

freedom mingled with the nervousness of his loneliness, and threw him into a curious condition which was not without fierceness. All his faculties were singularly awake. His brain was alert to think, his heart to feel. His eyes were everywhere, observing keenly, swiftly, darting from one object of the night to another to make a prey of all figures and events. The gift of manhood is meant to be used, he told himself, not to be kept in lavender. There was joy in that thought. Yet there seemed a great deal of sorrow in the night with him too. All things, many of them in opposition to each other, were mingling together and forming a great and strange chaos like a huge, round globe which was nothing and everything. He did not know whether he was miserable or happy. He knew only that he was almost horribly alive in this mist, and noise, and light, and darkness.

The shriek of an engine came from the station. It made him start and realise the tension of his nerves. He crossed the road, and took his way along the curving pavement which skirts the road between the paling of the station yard and the underground railway. Just beyond, where a second road cuts across at right angles to Victoria Street, there is a large public-house. On the far side of Victoria Street is the Standard Music Hall. Although Felix and Mrs. Wilding had not had very much to say to one another, he had stayed late at the hotel, putting off the moment of departure, perhaps because he felt it would be a little difficult for both of them. It was now past eleven o'clock, and as he reached the pavement in front of the public-house the audience began to stream out from the music-hall. He stood still to watch them. His curiosity was aroused. Most of them were lower middle-class people, shopboys and shopgirls, clerks, bookies, soldiers with their sweethearts or their 'pals.' Many of them, on getting into the air, stood still to light pipes or cheap cigars, or to exchange loud remarks. Some turned into a public-house by the music-hall. Others crossed the street to catch omnibuses, or to go into the gin-palace by which Felix was standing. Through the doors, when they swung open, the broad red backs of soldiers in uniform were visible in the glaring light, and wreaths of smoke circled and dispersed above the rows of glasses, the bottles, the gold-lettered barrels, and the handles which were perpetually being pulled down by tall women with tired, saucy eyes and curling fringes.

Felix moved on a few steps till he was exactly opposite to the music-hall. Then he stood still once more and looked across at the gaily lighted entrance.

'Seen the show to-night, guv'nor?' said a powerful voice at his side.

He looked quickly round, startled at being addressed in such a place and at such a moment, and saw that his interlocutor was a short, square-shouldered man of about thirty years of age; neatly dressed, like a workman, in corduroy trousers, with large flap pockets, which were kept closed by buttons, square-toed, wrinkled boots, a short, speckled coat and waistcoat of some rough material, a flannel shirt and a cap, from which appeared a straight lock of brown hair which had evidently been sedulously curled at the edge round a wet finger. About his bronzed, bull neck was knotted a bird's-eye handkerchief, and in his ears were narrow gold, or perhaps brass, earrings. His face was short-featured and resolute, absolutely unself-conscious and unsmiling, with a prominent chin, a small mouth, and bright, staring, brown eyes set deep in his head under short, dense eyebrows. He was smoking a clay pipe, and had his hands stuck into his pockets. His wrists, which were exposed to view, were brown, thick, and very muscular, and his whole appearance suggested industry linked with unconceited self-respect.

'What show?' Felix asked.

He liked the look of the man, and it emphasised his new freedom to talk to a total stranger encountered thus in the street.

The man took one broad hand out of his pocket, removed the pipe from his little mouth, and pointed with it to the music-hall across the way.

'Over yonder,' he said.

'No,' said Felix. 'Is it a good show?'

'Whopping,' replied the man, with laconic gravity.

He smoked for a moment imperturbably, and Felix was just about to bid him good-night and walk on when he said:

'See that name on top?'

'Where?' said Felix, wondering what he meant.

He pointed once more across the road to a huge placard outside the hall, on which the names of the performers were inscribed in red on a white ground. Felix looked and made out the words 'Happy Hal Blake' at the head of them.

'Who's that?' he asked.

The man pointed his pipe at his broad chest, keeping his bright, sunken eyes fixed on Felix.

'You!' said Felix, astonished.

The man was entirely unlike his idea of a music-hall performer.

'I'm Happy Hal,' replied the man, always with gravity. 'A month since I was just Hal Blake working on the new harbour at Dover. And now I'm Happy Hal and top the show.'

His staring eyes seemed to require some expression of opinion on this transformation. Felix would no doubt have thought it his duty to give one, but at this moment he was jostled by the end female of a line of four feathered girls who, with linked arms, were giggling their way towards the Vauxhall Bridge Road. She winked at him with preternatural slyness, as if they had been secretly concerned together in a hundred cunning deeds, uttered some remark in a piercing soprano voice, gave her united companions a violent tug, which set the whole lot laughing convulsively, and disappeared with them, struggling, round the corner.

'Can't—can't we go into the public-house and sit down for a moment?' said Felix.

As he spoke the lights of the music-hall went out.

'Well, I am a bit dry after singing,' said the man.

'Let me give you something to drink.'

'Thank you, sir, I don't mind if I do.'

Felix felt excited. To his raw youth this episode was an adventure. He turned and went into the public-house, followed by the man. It was thronged, chiefly with soldiers, but they found a bench to sit down on, beside a table near which was placed on the sanded floor a spittoon.

'What will you take?'

'Pint of stout-an'-bitter, sir, if it's all the same to you,' answered the man.

Felix ordered that nectar for them both, lit a cigarette, and glanced eagerly about him. At last he was in the midst of a London crowd, at last he was face to face with life, and saw town-bred men taking their pleasure. The noise in the public-house was very great. Everybody seemed to be talking. The soldiers stood together in knots, treated each other and bellowed. It seemed to Felix as if in that moment they were trying to throw off, almost angrily, all the accumulated burden of discipline which lay heavily upon them in barracks. Among them some civilians looked rather mean and solemn. A stout woman with a broad, brick-red face stood with a small man before the counter and drank some beer. She was dressed in heavy black with a large bonnet, and perspired freely as she lifted the glass with cushioned fingers to her mouth. The small man whose mouth was twisted into a meek expression,

looked at her patiently while she drank, as a child might look at a monument. Two or three painted girls peeped in furtively through the swing-doors. A roar of laughter came from the soldiers.

'A noisy lot, ain't they?' remarked Happy Hal calmly.

There was something very individual about him, a firm directness that struck Felix as singularly characteristic and decent-minded. His glance was unyielding but not bold. All his movements were calm and simple. Several of the people in the bar evidently recognised him, and now the red-faced woman, breathing heavily, looked round at him, threw back her bonnet-strings, and fixed her small pig's eyes upon him as if fascinated. She had just come out of the music-hall. Happy Hal took no sort of notice of the attention he attracted, but repeated again:

'A noisy lot.'

'I suppose people like this generally make a row at night in London,' said Felix.

He was thinking of the giggling girls, the female counterparts, he supposed, of the roaring soldiers. The man answered, 'Yes, a —— row,' using the workmen's adjective, then pulled himself up short and begged pardon.

'Oh, it's all right,' Felix said with a smile.

'We don't mean nothing by it,' said Happy Hal. 'But if you'd been on the Dover Harbour you'd be the same, I'll lay. Things is just 'abits and don't mean half what partic'ler parties says.'

'Yes. And so you're new to London?'

'Right out of the Mint, sir, as you might say, like a Christmas tanner. It's —— funny how things comes about. Why am I Happy Hal and top the show? Why, because an old gent had a bit of a cold and come down to the Dover Burlington to chuck it.'

'What old gentleman was that?' Felix asked, with genuine interest.

'Why, the party that runs half the London halls, they do say. Puckle, they call him, old Joe Puckle. Know him, guv'nor?'

'I can't say I do.'

'New to London, same as me, ain't you?'

Felix rather reluctantly acknowledged the damning fact.

'Ah. Every one knows old Joe Puckle.'

Felix found himself wishing to goodness that he did.

'Well, sir, old Joe he come strolling along by the harbour getting the air, and what should he do but hear me singing "Annie Laurie" while I was heaving up the blocks. First I give

it 'im—unbeknownst, of course—in the one voice, and then I up and gave it 'im in the other.'

'What! Have you got two voices?'

Happy Hal looked at Felix with his steady, bright eyes.

'Ah, to be sure, you said as you was new to London,' he rejoined.

Felix felt slightly irritated.

'Well, but——' he began, rather hastily.

'I 'm Double-voiced Hal, the Dover Nightingale, in the ads., sir, and earning my ten quid a week. They give me a trial and I took on. Old Joe, he brought me to London, and when they wanted me to dress up he says, "No," he says, "let the boy come on as he is"—of course after a bit of a clean-up and a bath—"and just stand there nat'ral and give it 'em." I just stood there nat'ral and give it 'em, sir, and they swallowed it the same as I swallow this stout-an'-bitter. Here 's to you, sir.'

He made away with it and sat staring steadily at Felix, as was his habit when he had finished what he would have called his 'say.'

'You're in luck, then,' said Felix, looking at him with real respect and curiosity as a popular public performer.

'Ah. I 'm going to the Palace presently, and if I take on there I 'm made. Then I 'll fetch up the kids and the missus.'

'Then they are at Dover still?'

'Ah, and in a fine taking over daddy's being the Dover Nightingale, I can tell you. Well, guv'nor——?'

His intonation suggested that he thought it time to be going. Felix got up and they made their way out, much stared at by the soldiers. As they passed the red-faced woman in the black bonnet, she said to the little man, in a thick, shrewish voice:

'There, what did I say? It *is* 'im. I tell you, it *is* 'im!'

She rotated, so that she might observe them going out. Her mouth gaped, and the tiny eyes looked out of their rolls of fat with a greedy and stupid excitement.

'I dig in Emily Street,' said Hal, when they were on the pavement.

'And I go that way,' rejoined Felix, pointing to Victoria Street.

Hal began to relight his pipe with deliberation. When he had made it draw thoroughly he said:

'Funny our meeting like this and both new in London, ain't

's, very.'

'You 're making a start here too, are you?'

'Yes, I 'm making a start too.'

'—— funny our meeting,' repeated Hal, again quite unconsciously repeating his adjective. 'I wish you luck with it, guv'nor.'

'And I wish you the same.'

'London's a rum place and no mistake about it. When I made to come up the missus didn't like it. Afraid of the dangers of it, she says. Dangers for a chap like me!'

For the first time he smiled slightly. Felix thought of his mother's fears.

'Dangers,' repeated the man. 'Not likely!'

His fixed look seemed to include Felix in his prophecy. He put up his hand to the long curl respectfully.

'See you again some day, guv'nor,' he said.

'I 'll come to hear you sing,' Felix replied heartily.

'Right. I come on at the half after ten, after the boxers, and I generally stand on the kerb and have a look at my name on the board as they 're coming out. Good night, guv'nor.'

'Good night.'

Happy Hal walked sturdily away, and was lost in the crowd. Just as he was disappearing the red female in the bonnet came waddling heavily past, attended meekly by the little man. She was still breathing hard and perspiring, and Felix heard her say excitedly:

'I don't care, I tell yer it *was* 'im!'

Felix felt that he had made acquaintance with one who, in a humble way, was famous.

He began to walk slowly towards the flat. The little conversation he had had, the companionship of a moment, had cheered him. Already London seemed different, more familiar, less terrific. He thought about Hal Blake, and decided that he had never seen anybody who looked more calmly respectable, more thoroughly equal, in a simple manner, to the facing of anything in the way of danger. Decision, sobriety, straightforwardness were written all over the man. And yet 'the missus' was afraid for him. Fear is doubtless a habit of many women. So Felix supposed, rather majestically, as he strolled on, mentally connecting his mother with this humble Dover wife whom he had never seen. Women sit afar, poor souls, in country places, and are afraid—of what? They don't know. Of vague, shadowy phantoms.

A sudden pity for women came to Felix, and made him feel tremendously manly and capable. After all, he said to himself,

CHAPTER IX

THREE days after his arrival in London Felix went to Green Street to call on Mrs. Ismey. Those three days had been both desolate and exciting. The sensation of loneliness, of being deserted by humanity, which he felt at moments in his flat, when he sat down to his solitary meals, or came in at night and had no one to say 'Good night' to before he went to bed, gave way to an ardour of youthful pleasure and interest as soon as he was in the streets among the hurrying crowds. He observed everybody and everything with keen excitement, but he did not analyse what he observed very closely. The analytic mood would have required of him more concentration than he had to dispose of just yet. His faculties were ranging feverishly over a wide field, and settled on no flower or weed for any length of time.

Strangely, he thought, now that he stood face to face with freedom and with life, the Balzac influence seemed to decrease, to ebb from his mind. The *Human Comedy*, which had played such a great part in his soul, which had been so terribly real to him that, at moments, it had been as his own long and fulfilled existence, now loomed less large before him. Its events were less full of significance for him, its figures less alive and potent. At La Maison des Alouettes he had felt that he was filled with all possible knowledge of men and women. Even at Churston Waters his sense of power to judge, which belongs to the human being peopled by experiences, had been solid and enduring. But now there were moments, and not a few, when the Balzac figures faded, the Balzac knowledge, which he had supposed to be his knowledge also, became but as a crumbling sand foundation on which his ignorance was striving in vain to find a foothold.

Even his cynicism, once so happily complete, now not seldom played him false. He found himself instinctively inclined to believe in the rectitude of those about him, instinctively surprised and pained when anything occurred to give a shock to such belief.

An attendant at the Mansions, a middle-aged man, had done

two or three errands for him, and had been very civil. One night, as Felix was coming home from a theatre, he saw this man reel out of the bar of a public-house decidedly drunk, maudlin, and singing a doleful song. He was astounded. When he got into his flat he asked himself why he was astounded because a man in that class, when off duty, took a glass too much. He sought to reason almost angrily with his astonishment. Yet it remained, and, when the next morning he saw the man in uniform, sober, respectful, ready to go on more errands, was companioned by a disgust which, he thought, had something cowardly in it.

Another evening he came home in a hansom, and, on reaching Victoria Street, gave the cabman, so he thought at the moment, a shilling. Before the cab had driven away he discovered that he had inadvertently given him half a sovereign. He knew this, because he knew that he had had only half a sovereign and a shilling in his waistcoat pocket, and he at once told the man of the mistake. The man promptly produced a shilling, and swore most positively that it was the coin just given to him by Felix, who said nothing more, but was again conscious of a sensation of amazement which he felt to be both ludicrous and inappropriate. Had Balzac then taught him that he lived in a world in which poor men never drink and never cheat? Or had he something in him, some seed perhaps of youth, which was persistently and irretrievably credulous? He wished he had some one to talk to, some one of whom he could ask questions without fear of ridicule. He had a few introductions to people in London, but he had resolved that his very first visit should be paid to Mrs. Ismey. Nevertheless he did not wish to seem in too violent a hurry to go to the house in Green Street. That, he thought, would be boyish and wanting in dignity. So he spent three lonely, but exciting days, and then set out.

When he reached the house a pale man-servant opened the door and told him that Mrs. Ismey was at home. He felt a thrill of pleasure as he stepped in; but when he had followed the servant up a broad flight of stairs to the first floor, he heard a sound of women's voices talking vivaciously, and his pleasure faded in nervousness. She was evidently not alone. The servant opened a door and announced him, but apparently was not heard, for as Felix entered the room the voices went on talking. One said:

'Oh, it might happen a hundred times under any man's eyes, and he would never suspect it.'

The other, Mrs. Ismey, replied:

towered in the corners. Felix thought it a lovely room, then noticed with surprise in the midst of its beauties, and close to the sofa where Mrs. Ismey was sitting, a table whose cover was stained with ink. On this table stood a solitary teacup and saucer, the saucer half full of milky tea, in the centre of a turmoil of ink-stained, paper-covered novels, bent quill-pens, and blotted scraps of note and manuscript paper. There was also a blotting-book drenched in ink, on which lay a half-eaten biscuit, the crumbs of which were freely scattered about. A large scent-bottle with a gold stopper stood sentinel beside it. Such a table in such a room was like a ragged tramp in a palace, Felix thought. He gazed at it with amazement. The half-eaten biscuit might have been gnawed by a rat. Perhaps it had been brought in for Lady Caroline's black dog. Then he glanced up into Mrs. Ismey's hazel eyes and saw the satirical look in them he remembered so well, and had so often thought about since the night before Margot's wedding.

'Yes, I'm very careless,' she said. 'But you must put up with it as my husband does.'

Felix turned scarlet, and was, as usual when with her, just about to protest he scarcely knew what, when she went on:

'Are you a tidy boy? Don't tell me. Yes, I expect you are, for you always look as if you came out of a bandbox, and yet you're not the least little bit finicking. And there are so many finicking men in London. Do you know any men in London yet?'

Felix was on the point of saying no, when he remembered Happy Hal. He could not help smiling as he thought of him in Mrs. Ismey's drawing-room.

'Now, what are you laughing at?' she asked. 'Every laugh in life should be shared. That is the perfect altruism.'

'I was thinking that I do know one man in London,' answered Felix, still smiling.

'Well? And what is he?'

'A double-voiced nightingale.'

'Explain.'

Felix related his interview with the music-hall star. When he had finished Lady Caroline, who had sat all the time in motionless silence, remarked:

'To-day's Thursday. To-morrow and Saturday I'm dining out. Sunday's a dead-letter day in England. On Monday I'll take a box at the Standard and we three will go to hear the man. You will both dine with me first in Great Cumberland Place.'

'Oh, thank you!' said Felix, delighted.

Mrs. Ismey, however, looked rather doubtful.

'How am I to get rid of Francis?' she said. 'You don't want him, I suppose?'

'I don't ask him. I won't have him.'

Felix sat amazed at the authoritative bluntness of this, to him, entirely new specimen of womanhood. But it left Mrs. Ismey, who was doubtless accustomed to it, entirely unmoved.

'I'll find something for him to do,' she said, 'or something may turn up.'

'If the man sings really well, and looks out of the usual mould, we'd have him back to supper afterwards,' continued Lady Caroline.

'Oh, but he's——' began Felix.

She cut him short with the emphatic remark.

'I've got no Francis, thank Heaven.'

'Haven't you?' said Felix uncomfortably.

'No. I'm a spinster.'

'Don't glory in your shame, Carrie,' drawled Mrs. Ismey, rather maliciously.

Lady Caroline ignored the thrust, and continued:

'I actually am what three-fourths of the women in my set secretly wish they were. I'm free.'

Felix saw a strange expression flit across the face of Mrs. Ismey at the last word. It suggested to his mind intensely bitter incredulity. It was gone in an instant.

'Married women are for ever talking about freedom,' Lady Caroline went on. 'Why? Because people usually talk about what they don't possess. Paupers talk about money, cowards about bravery. What's your pet subject?'

The question was put to Felix with exceeding abruptness and the light eyes stared hard into his. He hesitated and glanced towards Mrs. Ismey.

'You want a woman to tell you!' said Lady Caroline. 'She's bound to tell you a lie.'

Mrs. Ismey laughed lightly. A sudden impulse to be preposterously truthful came to Felix.

'I'm afraid my favourite subject's myself,' he said.

Lady Caroline brushed her hand the wrong way over the black dog's back. A dull growl was heard.

'And are you a good topic of conversation?' she inquired.

She did not smile as she asked the question. She had not smiled once since Felix came into the room.

'I'm afraid—I don't suppose I can be,' he replied. 'I suppose I'm too young.'

'You must be very young if you think that old age is a good bone for conversational gnawing.'

As abruptly as she had opened the talk with him she closed it, and, turning to Mrs. Ismey, said:

'We'll play that Rheinberger, and then I'm off. Come along.'

She got up, throwing the black dog in a heap on the floor, and walked to one of the pianos.

'I'll play first,' she remarked.

Mrs. Ismey cast a whimsical look at Felix.

'Forgive me!' she whispered.

'Oh, I'd love to hear it,' he replied eagerly, standing up.

'Let him smoke, do,' said Lady Caroline, with her back turned to them.

'Do smoke,' said Mrs. Ismey, with humorous obedience.

'But in your drawing-room!'

'We both do it.'

'Thank you. Then——'

He began to light a cigarette, while the two women sat down at the two pianos and arranged their music. Then suddenly he said to Mrs. Ismey:

'But can't I turn over for you?'

'Me?' said Lady Caroline. 'No, thanks. If you want us to appreciate you just sit quiet and smoke. It will be all over in a quarter of an hour. Now then!'

She began playing an ingenious extempore prelude in G minor, the key of the duet. The black dog set up a howl. She instantly got up, lifted it by the scruff of the neck, disappeared with it into an inner room, in a moment returned without it, sat down and resumed her prelude. Not a muscle of her fat face had changed during this proceeding which, why he scarcely knew, made a very powerful impression, that was rather horrible, on Felix. She finished the prelude, looked round at Mrs. Ismey, said sharply 'Now!' and they began the duet.

Music nearly always had an exciting and stimulating effect upon Felix. When he heard it he longed to make an effort, in what direction he knew not, to accomplish something, of what nature he could not tell. It also stirred within him the sleeping dogs that the timid wish to leave to their sleep, and that even the more fearless watch uneasily when they begin to move, to shake themselves, to show the light in their strange and animal eyes.

But to-day he had special cause for excitement. Both these

women, with whom he found himself alone, and, he felt, in a sort of definite intimacy created by this calm resumption by them in his presence of their normal life without him—both these women had strongly marked personalities. He was intelligent enough to feel instantly the intelligence of others, and, as he was inclined to shy at stupidity, so he was moved to fly at and cling to the reverse. At this period of his life it seemed to him that cleverness never moved without its child, sympathy, and the presence of sympathy set him in a glow, fierce and ardent as the flame in the heart of a fire, if—and this was odd, perhaps, in him—it was the sympathy of those set naturally by fate outside his intimate life's door, so that they could not claim to enter as a right. The sympathy of his own people was like daily bread, and different, not exciting.

Felix felt that both these playing women were very intelligent. Mrs. Ismey he supposed, without exactly asking himself why, to be brilliantly clever. From the first moment of his seeing her he had thought of her as a brilliant woman. Her satirical self-possession, her odd habit of replying to merely mental questions, or alluding calmly to the unuttered comments of the soul, had startled him at once into an enthusiastic belief in her brain power. In the fascination which she had exercised over him from their first meeting there was a mingling of several elements. He felt that she had what he had never encountered before, a *chic* mind. Had he been obliged to define what he meant by *chic* he would have said—well, he himself wondered what he would have said. One thing that is certain, he thought, is that nothing stupid can be *chic.*

Lady Caroline Hurst was not *chic.* She showed no pliancy, no consciousness of others in relation to herself. There was a certain ruthlessness in her demeanour that seemed to Felix to be Russian. He had never met a Russian, but that was what occurred to him. There was something almost barbarous about her, something cold, strong, carelessly defiant. When she picked up the black dog by the scruff of its neck he felt that she could vivisect it without turning a hair. But he felt also that she would perfectly understand what were its sensations while she was doing so. He knew she was clever, though she had not said a clever thing, or wished to, since he had come into the room. That she had not wished to was a sign of her intelligence, he thought, and also showed to a certain extent its nature.

In both these women he knew—yes, somehow he knew—that there was something, even much, that was sympathetic to him. He was surprised to find he had this conviction about Lady

Caroline. For, in a way, she repelled and half disgusted him. Her face was unbeautiful in contour, in expression, but especially in colouring. Her manners were certainly not charming. What was it in her, then, that coming out of her towards him attracted some part of him so strongly? Perhaps her lack of conventionality, her love of freedom. Perhaps her total indifference to his possible thoughts of her. Perhaps—he could not tell yet. He might never be able to tell.

Mrs. Ismey had a charm that any man might be conscious of. Her clothes were lovable, for one thing. He remembered the rustle of her gown in the garden that night. Even that was individual.

He had lit his cigarette, and sat down in an armchair from which he could see the faces of both the players, Mrs. Ismey's best. She played well, quite brilliantly. But Lady Caroline played better still. He noticed that at once. She had the authority of a good professional, Mrs. Ismey the deftness and light-hearted ingenuity of an accomplished amateur, not untouched by a certain inconsequence and volatility which were absent from Lady Caroline's interpretation of her music. Mrs. Ismey's face changed often while she played, but never looked severe. It was always the face of one engaged in a pastime. Lady Caroline's was heavier and more stony than it had been before, and scarcely changed at all. But it reminded Felix of the face of the statue at Tours, and he thought that in its immobility it was profoundly intelligent.

The second movement of the duet was a canon in which Lady Caroline gave out the theme, which was immediately echoed by Mrs. Ismey. The melody was delicious, flowing limpidly without strain, as if it had gushed out of the composer as a stream gushes out of the earth in a sylvan place. But, while he listened to it, Felix fell into an odd train of thought, which was directly caused by it, yet which partially diverted his attention from it. This canon, and the way it was performed, seemed suddenly to make clear to him something that he must have previously thought without knowing he thought it. That was exactly how it seemed to him. It gave him an insight into the relations of these two women whom he scarcely knew. Lady Caroline on her piano commanded, Mrs. Ismey on hers obeyed. The former called the tune, saying 'Do this!' the latter instantly did as she was desired to do. In such a canon for two pianos the one must inevitably be the echo of the other. Felix knew this, knew that his imagination might be playing him absurd tricks. Nevertheless, as Lady Caroline struck out her

phrase authoritatively, and Mrs. Ismey, an instant later, struck out its echo in her more suppliant fashion, he found himself forming two words with his lips: 'Master—Servant.'

The third movement carried his mind away from consideration of the possible human relations existing between the performers. He listened to it as he had often listened to music before, and enjoyed it with a less restless brain and heart. Directly the last chord was struck the faint sound of a very ugly and vicious wailing penetrated into the room.

'Heavens! Chicho is completely out of the key,' said Mrs. Ismey.

She struck an A natural, as if she were giving the note to a violin. The hideous wailing was renewed more loudly. Lady Caroline got up.

'He's in a vile temper to-day,' she said.

'Why?'

'He wants something he hasn't had,' Lady Caroline answered.

As she spoke she glanced at Mrs. Ismey, and Felix saw a sudden expression, which seemed to him to be one of disgust mingled with a tinge of amusement, come into the latter's face. But she only said:

'Oh, I see.'

Lady Caroline pulled on her white kid gloves, and as she did so turned to Felix.

'Don't forget Monday,' she said.

'No. It's most awfully kind of you to ask me.'

'Dinner at a quarter to eight. I suppose that will do. When does this fellow come on?'

'Not till half-past ten, I believe.'

'Oh! then we'll say eight. My number in Cumberland Place is one hundred and seven. If you've a bad memory write it down. Good-bye.' She nodded carelessly, turned to Mrs. Ismey, said 'No Francis, mind!' and walked into the inner room. An instant later she came back, carrying the little black dog under her left arm, and went out at the drawing-room door without addressing another word to either of them, or even looking at them.

When the door shut with no uncertain sound, Mrs. Ismey said to Felix carelessly:

'Of course you're fond of dogs?'

Felix was devoted to dogs, but he had conceived a perfect horror of Lady Caroline's. This horror was just then particularly strong upon him. He replied, therefore, with a tinge of hesitating doubt:

'Oh yes, of course. Who isn't?'

'Chicho is Italian. What d'you think of him?'

'Oh—well, I know nothing about him. But—he's a rum little chap, I think. Isn't he?'

The boyishness of the remark seemed to please her.

'How old you make me feel,' she said, smiling. Never mind Chicho. We'll have tea, and talk over your *début*.'

'Oh, but don't have tea for me. You've had it already.'

She looked at the dirty tramp of a table and at him, opened her lips as if she were going to say something, then shut them and touched a bell. A footman came.

'Take that table away, please, and bring tea,' she said.

The man went out, carrying the litter. When they were again alone Mrs. Ismey sat down on a sofa, leaned her head back against a cushion, and looked at Felix for a minute or two in silence, but not as if she were observing him. Then she said:

'Now I've got something to say to you. If you've taken your Balzac to heart it oughtn't to surprise you. I must tell you that I, too, know my *Comédie Humaine* very well indeed. You've read it as a boy. I read it as a girl—and many other things girls don't generally read. Perhaps I shall judge your actions rather shrewdly, Mr. Wilding; judge them, too, in relation to this odd education—if it is an education—of yours. And I shall very soon see——'

She stopped. Felix felt as if everything in him had been suddenly waked up. He sat down quickly on a low chair just opposite to her, and leaned forward with his hands clasped and dropped down between his knees.

'What? See what?' he asked eagerly, and quite fearlessly, like a boy.

'How much, after all, a human being can learn from a series of books in the way of worldly wisdom. Just that. Now, how much do you think?'

Suddenly Felix reddened, remembering that there had been many moments when he had felt as if he possessed all, absolutely all, worldly knowledge.

'You mean without experience of his own?' he asked, with some hesitation.

'Yes. You've had absolutely none—you say?'

'None,' he said humbly.

It seemed to him almost shameful to have had none.

'Well!' she said, 'aren't you going to answer my question?'

'It's rather difficult to, but I suppose one ought to be able

to apply a good deal of book-knowledge to real life, if the books one has read are true to life.'

'Ah!'

She spoke the word with an intonation which gave him no clue as to whether she agreed or disagreed with his remark. Was it silly? He wondered. He felt very doubtful of himself with her. After a pause, which seemed to him long, she lifted her head from the cushion, sat straight up, and said:

'You remember the letter my husband wrote to you?'

'Yes,' he answered eagerly. 'And I've been wanting ever since to thank you——'

'Me!' she interrupted. 'Why?'

'Why, because, of course, I knew directly that you had——'

'My dear boy, I had nothing to do with the letter. If I had had it would never have been written. That's Irish, but true.'

Felix felt as if he had been plunged into cold water.

'Oh, I thought—I thought, of course——' he began.

'In your generosity you gave me the old-fashioned rôle of good fairy. No. I said just now I had something to say to you. It will prove to you at once how utterly wrong your idea was. You wrote, didn't you, to say you would be delighted to go into my husband's office if a place could be found there for you?'

'Yes,' he said, wondering.

'I want you to refuse to do that.'

Felix said nothing. In the first moment of surprise he felt crushed, like a man whose career is suddenly swept away from him. She saw his obvious confusion and distress, for his face showed them vividly, as it showed nearly all his feelings.

'Forgive me for asking you,' she said, with a gentleness that he had never noticed in her before. 'As far as the money's concerned such a post isn't necessary to you, is it?'

'Oh no. Not at all,' he replied quickly, reddening. 'I wasn't thinking of that.'

'You needn't explain that you weren't—to me.'

There was a touch of satire in her voice.

'I had to ask,' she continued. 'If that is so, then you can do what I want. Will you?'

'Of course I will.'

'And you won't say a word to my husband, or to any one, of our having talked this matter over.'

'No.'

'It will be our secret.'

As she said the last words she looked into his face, and, for the first time with her, Felix felt the man in him stronger than

the child, felt that she was depending upon him, trusting to him. This sensation changed him at once from a depressed boy into an exultant youth. He forgot the probable, the certain awkwardness of the position in which Mrs. Ismey was calmly placing him, without explanation. He was only conscious that a fascinating woman, who knew all the things he did not know, was relying upon his honour, was sharing with him a secret. And he was glad as he said, 'Yes, our secret.'

As he spoke the drawing-room door opened and Mr. Ismey came in. In a flash Felix was conscious of the extreme difficulty —yes, in a small way the difficulty was extreme—in which he was placed. He jumped up from his chair feeling like a criminal. Mr. Ismey shut the door and came up to him with an outstretched hand.

'What, Wilding!' he said. 'I'm very glad. We expected you this month.'

Just then the servant returned with the tea. He put it down on a table by Mrs. Ismey's sofa, arranged everything with quiet precision, and went out. His entrance had made a momentary diversion, and enabled Felix to notice the unruffled calm of Mrs. Ismey. She smiled at her husband and said:

'You see he has kept his promise and paid his first visit to us.'

'Capital,' Mr. Ismey said cordially, sitting down opposite to his wife. 'I have been thinking about you since I have been back at the office.'

Felix felt horribly uncomfortable, so much so that he was physically affected. When Mrs. Ismey gave him his tea-cup he took it with a hand that was slightly trembling. He saw her lips press themselves together, and cursed himself. What a pitiful display he was making. And she was so perfectly cool, almost miraculously cool, he thought, as many men have thought about many women in such hole-and-corner crises.

'It's awfully good of you,' he said gruffly, in a manner not his own.

'Valeria, this tea is terribly strong,' Mr. Ismey said.

'I like it strong,' she answered.

'I know you do, but, as you drink so much tea, it is very bad for you.'

She slightly shrugged her shoulders.

'Let me give you some hot water, then,' she said.

'Yes,' he replied, holding out his cup. 'But put some in yours too.'

She said nothing, but Felix noticed that immediately after-

wards she drank a cup of tea to which she had not added any water.

'How are all your people, and how is Stephen?' Mr. Ismey said, turning again to Felix.

The peculiar sadness which Felix had noticed before in his expression was still there. Some melancholy had apparently stamped its sign-manual upon him, some permanent melancholy.

'They are all well, thank you,' Felix answered, still uneasily.

'And the marriage is a success, I am sure.'

'Oh yes, I believe so.'

'Stephen will be a good husband.'

'Stephen is a pearl above price,' said Mrs. Ismey, without a shade of irony.

Mr. Ismey glanced at her quietly. As he did so she poured herself out another cup of almost black tea and began to drink it. He looked away.

'How is the flat?' he asked Felix. 'Do you feel at home in it yet?'

'Well, perhaps hardly that. But it's just the thing for me. It was awfully good of you to take so much trouble, and we are —we are tremendously obliged to you.'

The cordiality which he threw into his voice sounded to himself unnatural, because he was trying to make it do a double duty. He knew that, later, he would be forced to seem strangely ungracious, even ungrateful.

'You will feel far more at home when you are settled down to work,' Mr. Ismey said, with a kindly meaning that made Felix feel hot. 'There's nothing like work for making men feel at home in strange places, or the want of it for making them feel quite homeless anywhere.'

'My dear Francis, you ought to have entered Stephen's profession.'

Mrs. Ismey spoke very sweetly and simply, with a bright smile at her husband. He took no notice of her remark, and did not look as if he had heard it.

'You will find that, Wilding,' he continued.

'I'm sure it's much better to have something to do,' said Felix.

'It's a curse not to,' said Mr. Ismey rather moodily.

'Dear me!' said Mrs. Ismey. 'Then are all of us poor idle women cursed? Do you include us in one comprehensive damnation, Francis?'

'I was speaking of men,' he said quietly.

'Are we so different that what is a curse to them is a blessing to us?'

'I did not say idleness was a blessing to anybody, but it is probably more natural to you than to us. An idle man is contemptible. An idle woman may at least be charming.'

'My husband is really one of the old-fashioned men who would like to see their womenkind always busy about the house,' Mrs. Ismey said to Felix. 'Counting napkins and putting labels on preserve pots. Now I should make mistakes in my addition, and think honey was marmalade. That is where progress is taking the female sex.'

Mr. Ismey smiled.

'I cannot conceive you in the rôle of the good housewife, Valeria,' he said. 'But now, Wilding, about our business.'

'Our business?' Felix echoed, stealing a quick glance at Mrs. Ismey, who was glancing dreamily towards the window as if she had abruptly fallen into a reverie.

'Yes; when are you coming to pay me a visit at the office?'

'I—I could come any day.'

'To-morrow morning, for instance?'

Felix felt his heart sink.

'Yes,' he said. 'But I don't want to bother you.'

'I don't ask you to come to bother me, but to help me.'

'I—I'm afraid I could not be of much use,' Felix said.

Mr. Ismey seemed suddenly struck by the discomfort of his manner and looked at him rather narrowly and, Felix fancied, with a kind of severity.

'If I were you,' he said, with a good-nature which Felix feared was prompted by a secret contempt, 'I would make up my mind that there was a great power of being of use both to myself and others in me. To have that feeling and to be able to rest upon it is to be halfway to success.'

'Francis, I was right,' interposed his wife. 'You could completely cut out Stephen.'

'I feel sure that in the office you will be able to do good work for the firm,' said Mr. Ismey, ignoring the interruption. 'And that it will be fortunate for us in the end to have you in your beginning.'

Felix understood the delicacy which prompted the remark, the desire that he should think that any obligation there was would be equally divided. Considering Mr. Ismey's position and his there was a very charming tact shown towards him. He felt it painfully, but a secret sense of guilt, which it was very evident was not shared by Mrs. Ismey, prevented him from being able to show anything but discomfort.

'I'm glad if you think I could be of any use,' he began, and

then stopped short, wondering if he were not accepting the post he had just promised Mrs. Ismey to refuse. 'You 're most awfully good to me,' he concluded, lamely but with genuine feeling.

As he said the last words he got up to go. Mrs. Ismey said good-bye to him with something of the sweet brightness she had shown towards her husband when she was comparing him to Stephen. And Felix, remembering it, felt as if he were being punished, whipped with a silken thread that hurt because of the intention with which it was used. Mr. Ismey went with him downstairs to the front door, and there shook him warmly by the hand.

'Good-bye, my boy,' he said. 'And good luck in London. Come to Norwich Street, Strand, to-morrow at twelve.'

'Yes. Thanks very much. You are good to me.'

When Mr. Ismey re-entered the drawing-room he said to his wife:

'That 's a highly strung, odd boy.'

But she was lying down on a sofa, reading a volume of French poetry, and did not seem to hear him.

Marshall.' When he saw it Felix was conscious of a thrill of excitement, for King Marshall was one of the most notorious and brilliant novelists of the day. He was also reader to Ismey and Co., but this Felix did not know. The clerk showed Felix into the sanctum of Mr. King Marshall, which was empty, said, 'Will you kindly sit down here for a few minutes?' and went out, shutting the door.

Felix looked round with a sense of awe. The room was very plainly furnished, and his attention was most attracted by an immense writing-table which stood in the middle of it, covered with typewritten manuscript. On a blotting-pad lay a large sheet of foolscap nearly filled with writing in a tiny, neat hand. As he was glancing away from this for fear of seeing words not meant for his eyes, the door opened and a man walked quickly in.

He was small and slim, with a large forehead, thin hair, once blond, but now turning grey, and very large, fiery, brown eyes, which looked both fierce and melancholy. Not only his face but his whole body expressed nervousness and a sort of sad energy—impetuosity shadowed with tears. When he saw Felix he looked surprised. Felix felt all the uneasiness of a sensitive intruder.

'I came to see Mr. Ismey,' he said, springing up from the chair on which he had been sitting. 'They showed me in here.'

'Oh, sit down, sit down,' said the man in a weak voice.

He went up to the writing-table, sat down on the revolving chair which stood before it, and began to look over the typewritten manuscript. But perhaps the presence of a stranger altered his purpose, for, after two or three minutes, he laid it down and turned his fiery eyes on Felix. He looked at him for a long time—at least it seemed to him a long time—and at last said:

'Are you joining the band of writers already?'

'No—at least I haven't begun to write yet,' answered Felix, who suddenly felt as if he had always meant to be a writer, and would rather die than be anything else.

'But you intend to, I suppose?' said the man, still looking at him with a sort of vague melancholy under which there was latent fire.

'I should like to. I want to. But I don't know whether—I mean I dare say I have no talent,' Felix answered.

A conviction that this man must be King Marshall thrilled him with excitement and enthusiasm. The man sighed, whether wearily or impatiently Felix could not tell.

'Do you know how to find out whether you have talent or not?' he said after a minute.

'By trying to write and——'

'No, no.'

'How?' exclaimed Felix.

His self-consciousness and dread of being in the way suddenly left him.

'Try to see what is, and to think about it naturally.'

'Is that difficult,' Felix ventured to ask.

'Very, very difficult. To many people, I suppose, it is quite impossible. They either cannot see, or they see double, or they see men as trees walking. And what they see inaccurately they think about with affectation. Their minds are as artificial as many of the poor women whom one meets here in London, trying to give mother Nature the cold shoulder. They are as afraid to be natural, even by themselves, as to go naked in Regent Street. If you can convince yourself and the unaffected that you can see what is as it is, and think about it naturally, you have talent. And then, if you come to write, try at first to do one thing only, try to tell the truth. When you are sure that you are able to tell the truth, try to tell it beautifully—but not till you are sure.'

The door opened, the clerk reappeared.

'Mr. Ismey will see you if you will come this way,' he said, looking towards Felix.

The man at the writing-table nodded and picked up a sheet of manuscript. Felix, with a sinking heart, followed the clerk.

'Was that Mr. King Marshall?' he asked in the passage.

'Yes,' said the clerk. 'I didn't remember he was here to-day.'

He showed Felix into a large light room with brown paper covered walls, on which were hung quantities of caricatures and portraits of men of the day. In this room Mr. Ismey was standing.

'Capital!' he said, shaking hands with Felix. 'You are a punctual man. That's right.'

'I'm afraid I was rather too early,' said Felix.

Now he was actually with Mr. Ismey he felt like one about to be executed, and could not look him in the face.

'Sit down,' said Mr. Ismey, sitting down himself near the window, 'and we'll get to business at once. I have a great deal to do to-day. Now——'

But Felix, with a sort of desperate courage, interrupted him.

'Please I want to say something,' he began, speaking with awkward haste.

Mr. Ismey looked rather surprised.

'Well, what is it?' he asked, crossing one leg over the other, and resting his hands, palm downwards, on the arms of his chair.

'Since—since I've been in London I've been thinking things over,' Felix said, looking away from Mr. Ismey. 'And I—I've decided to—to do nothing definite for just a few months. You see'— he stole a glance at Mr. Ismey, and thought he was looking rather stern—'it's all quite new to me, and I feel I don't really know at all yet what I wish to be and do. I hope you understand. I don't put it well, I know.'

'Oh, then you have changed your mind? You don't want to come to us?'

Mr. Ismey's voice was quite kind, but somehow it made Felix feel most awfully ashamed of himself.

'It isn't that,' he said. 'I quite understand—I mean I know what a great chance it is to be allowed to come here. I can't say how grateful I am to you for all your kindness.'

'Never mind that. But you have decided not to come?'

The absurdity of vehement expressions of gratitude, combined with a definite refusal to take advantage of the opportunity for which he was offering up thanks, struck Felix forcibly.

'I think I'd rather wait and just make up my mind what I'm fitted for,' he answered, trying to assume a calm and common-sense tone. 'You see I'm very young, and it's awfully difficult to know in a moment what one really wants to make of one's life.'

'Yes, it is difficult,' said Mr. Ismey, still kindly. 'Well, I won't keep you. Let us see something of you in town. Can you come and dine one night?'

'Oh, thank you very much. I should like to immensely.'

Mr. Ismey thought for a moment. Then he said:

'Come on Monday night, will you?'

'Oh, I'm most fearfully sorry,' exclaimed Felix, feeling that he was being forced by cruel circumstance to seem anxious to avoid all Mr. Ismey's extreme kindness.

'Why? What's the matter?'

'That night, only that one night, I am engaged. I have promised to dine with Lady Caroline Hurst.'

'Oh,' Mr. Ismey said.

This time his voice was unmistakably grim, and when Felix looked at him his face was grim too. He returned Felix's glance, opened his lips, and was certainly on the point of saying something abrupt and very decisive. Felix knew that by his whole expression, which had suddenly coarsened, and by the curious bitterness of his eyes.

'With Lady Caroline Hurst,' he said. 'So you——'

He had spoken with harsh roughness, but suddenly he stopped speaking, leaving his sentence unfinished.

'We must find another night,' he said, after a pause, coldly. 'Well, good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Felix.

Mr. Ismey walked with him to the door and opened it; just as Felix was going out he laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

'Don't stay long in London without finding some work to do,' he said. 'And be very——'

He hesitated. His expression was so strange that it startled Felix. There was something like agony in his face. His eyes were very wide open and dilated.

'Don't be deceived in people if you can help it,' he said at length.

He lowered his voice and almost muttered:

'But you will, of course you will.'

He took his hand from Felix's shoulder, and Felix went out, wondering.

CHAPTER XI

THAT evening Felix wrote to his mother. He felt both excited and depressed. His morning had been so disagreeable that his whole day lay in shadow. He had not known what to say to Mr. Ismey. He did not know what to write to his mother. At one moment he thought of packing his bag and catching the afternoon train to Frankton Wells. The idea of the quiet, low-roofed drawing-room was pleasant in his mind. But he dismissed it. He dreaded his mother's questions, her astonishment. Both would be so natural and so intolerable. He would, perhaps, be driven to lies. That thought sickened him. So he wrote, and, being in this unquiet and desolate mood, wrote abruptly to say that he had decided not to enter the office of Ismey and Co. at present, but to 'look about' him—the vague phrase served as well as another —before settling down to any business or profession. He added that he had explained matters to Mr. Ismey that morning. 'Mr. Ismey,' he wrote, 'quite understands the position. After all, I am awfully young, and it's safer to look round before getting involved in anything that I mightn't like, or be suited to, in the end.'

He knew the letter was disingenuous, but that he could not help. When it had gone he pulled himself together, and took himself to task for his depression and confusion of mind. He felt that both were unworthy of him. When he sat in the ruined chapel of La Maison des Alouettes, when he talked with the tailor in the forest, he had felt that he had the temperament of a conqueror held in leash by circumstance. London was to be his prey, not he London's. Now was he to sink down under the first blow, to be discouraged by the first occurrence which he could not immediately understand? He was resolved to apply his knowledge persistently, even coldly, in the conduct of his life and in his relations with the men and women of this new world. And he thought of King Marshall's words, which were surely a sort of summing-up in little of the great life-task of the dead man who had first waked him to the glory of the

sunrise and to the blackness of nights without a star. It was a grand and sufficient duty to learn to see, and to think rightly about things seen. A long lifetime was too short for clear vision of even a few of the teeming facts of existence. He resolved to be impassioned in his search for truths, to be fearless of them when they were terrible, to be tender to them when they were weak, to be their bold cavalier when they were joyous. That was the part of a man in the world. That should be his part. Already he was face to face with a mass of facts which he was as yet unable to comprehend. He did not know, he could not divine why Mrs. Ismey had required of him the act of abnegation which he had accomplished. He resolved that he would know her secret reason. Surely his obedience armed him with a right to this knowledge. She might not recognise it. That was to be proved. He longed to bridge the gulf of time which lay between him and Monday.

When Monday came at last it brought a long letter from his mother. She was evidently in much anxiety at his unaccountable *volte-face*, and could only look forward with alarm to the prospect of his idleness in London. Indeed, she expressed herself with quite unusual decision, and begged Felix to go to Mr. Ismey, and say that he had reconsidered the matter, and wished to be admitted to the office. Separated from her son, and freed to some extent by her complete loneliness from the influences which her affections rendered so potent, Mrs. Wilding was now playing a father's part with some real conviction. She saw clearly that idleness in London must be bad for a boy of Felix's age, and seeing this she suddenly, urged by fear and a loving sense of duty, woke up into a sort of gentle manliness. Felix was quite amazed by the definiteness of the letter. It rendered his position still more awkward. Mrs. Wilding made one mistake. She put a postscript, which ran as follows: 'Stephen came over just after I got your letter. He is much surprised that you should have refused Mr. Ismey, after being so anxious to go to him. He cannot understand it any more than I can.'

This mention of Stephen threw Felix into a condition of acute irritation. As he dressed to go to Lady Caroline's dinner he felt angry, even with Mrs. Ismey. This sensation was only fleeting, but it left behind it a definite resolve to find out why the sacrifice he had made had been required of him.

He reached Great Cumberland Place punctually, and was shown by a man-servant into a small room at the back of the house on the ground floor. While he waited there for Lady

Caroline he examined this room shrewdly, for of course he knew from Balzac that it is possible to learn much about the creature from the creature's shell. And, first, he found himself wondering why Lady Caroline chose to live in such a big house alone. He did not know that it had been left to her by her father, and that she only went on living where she had always been accustomed to live. So he judged that she was fond of space, and was fearless. Timid women are afraid of empty rooms and gaping corridors at night.

He gathered further that Lady Caroline was an untidy woman. The room was in considerable disorder. Upon an open pianoforte a quantity of loose music was scattered. On two of the chairs books and magazines were lying. A pair of embroidered Turkish slippers stood near the fireplace, one with its toe, the other with its heel presented towards the flames. A man's smoking-cap—at least Felix thought it must be a man's smoking-cap—lay on a table beside an open silver box half full of cigarettes. On one side of the fire there was a gigantic low couch littered with cushions, and dented in the middle, as if it were lain upon incessantly. There were more books on a wicker table close to it. Felix glanced at two or three of them. One was De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*. Another was a medical book. A third was a large volume on *Nightmare and Its Causes*, by a Frenchman of whom Felix had never heard. There were heavy red curtains over the windows and the one door. Red silk covered the walls. The light in the room was very faint, coming only from the fire and from one small lamp with a dark-red shade. The furniture looked disarranged, as if it were often pushed about, as if no chair, no footstool, no small table had any fixed abiding-place. Felix gained an impression that the owner and occupier of this room was eccentric, changeable, now lazy, now energetic. Just as he was thinking this Lady Caroline came in.

She looked sleepy and old, much older than she had looked at Mrs. Ismey's four days ago, and wore the same black gown she had worn then, with the same pearl earrings in her ears. She had on a big black-and-pink hat, and carried in one hand a veil and two large pins set with pearls.

'Well, here you are!' she said, in her usual informal manner. 'Valeria hasn't turned up yet. But she's always late.'

She shook Felix listlessly by the hand, went over to the mantelpiece, where there was a narrow, long mirror, put the veil and pins down, and stared at herself moodily in the glass. Then she yawned drearily and turned round.

'I've been in bed all the afternoon,' she said. 'Just got up.'

'Oh, I hope you're not ill,' said Felix sympathetically.

'Ill! Why should I be ill?'

Her voice sounded irritable.

'I only thought as you said you'd been in bed.'

'Well, I was up all night. One must get some sleep. I shall be all right after dinner. There's too much light in this room.'

She went to the lamp and turned it down, then came back to the fire.

'My dying remark—if I'm so garrulous as to make one—will be the reverse of Goethe's,' she said.

As she spoke she yawned again, this time brutally, as if she were grossly enjoying a pleasure. Felix had never been with any one, man or woman, who seemed so entirely careless of the presence of others. Even when Lady Caroline spoke to him he felt as if she were talking as people talk to themselves when they are walking alone in the dark. Yet he was conscious of being oddly at home with her, and she interested him intensely. She seemed to him to be really what is often called 'a character,' not a *poseuse*, but a natural original.

'I shan't give Valeria much rope,' she said, after a pause which Felix did not try to fill up. 'Another five minutes and then—oh, here she is.'

Mrs. Ismey came in, also wearing a hat and looking, Felix thought, comparing her with Lady Caroline, young and fresh and charming. She made no apology for being late, and Lady Caroline said nothing about it. Indeed, she scarcely said anything at all. When Felix shook hands with Mrs. Ismey he read gratitude in her eyes, and understood that she was thanking him for the sacrifice he had made. Her glance made him glow. The ability to do something for a woman of the world gave him the sudden satisfactory sensation of being a man of the world.

Dinner was announced, and as they walked through the hall, in which a large Spanish dish of charcoal was burning, Lady Caroline said to Mrs. Ismey:

'Was Francis at all tiresome about your coming?'

'No. I can't say he often is tiresome. Pride is one of his virtues. I can conceive his murdering me, but not scolding me.'

'A lesson for you,' said Lady Caroline to Felix, as they sat down at the dinner-table. 'If you want to win a wife's respect murder her, if you like, but don't scold her.'

'Scolding, certainly, is awfully undignified,' he answered,

thinking, with some shame, how often he had indulged in something very like it at home.

'Most men have no idea of human dignity,' returned Lady Caroline. 'That is to say if they are thoroughly civilised. Civilisation tends to destroy dignity. The old territorial magnate was a savage compared to the modern London man, but he was ten times more dignified. It doesn't much matter.'

As Felix listened to her drowsy and musical voice he wondered whether anything mattered in her opinion. There was a certain amount of light shed over the round dining-table by a lamp which hung from the carved wooden ceiling, and he could see her face more clearly than in the other room. Again he noticed the peculiarity of her complexion. To-night the faint and disagreeable pinkness spread up to her eyes. Even the many little wrinkles round them were tinged with it. The skin under them hung loosely in bags. He thought she looked unwell, but as if she did not care whether she were well or ill. As he glanced away from her he saw Mrs. Ismey's intelligent eyes fixed upon him. He devoted himself to his soup, wondering whether as usual she had read his thought. Neither Lady Caroline nor Mrs. Ismey took soup, and as the dinner went on Felix often found himself eating alone. Both his companions drank champagne, but they seemed to have no appetites. Between the courses Lady Caroline smoked cigarettes, slowly, as a man smokes, not excitedly, like so many women. She began to look slightly less sleepy. Mrs. Ismey, from the first, was in a lively mood. Felix found her occasionally sub-acid gaiety, the airy, irresponsible, yet quite unfoolish charm of her manner, brought into high relief by the proximity of Lady Caroline, whose curious, puffy heaviness was an admirable foil to it. He thought he had never seen two human beings more essentially different than these two women. To-night Lady Caroline made him think of an animal which had been hibernating in some dark hole during a long winter, and which had just emerged, blinking, into a forgotten world. Mrs. Ismey was like a satirical nymph dressed in the latest fashion. Yet there were moments in which he felt that they were alike. In what way he could not tell. Once, when they were both looking serious, he told himself that there was some furtive similarity in their faces. Again, he fancied that occasionally there was a trick of manner which linked them in his thought, an odd, sudden indifference, an inconsequence—he did not know. Perhaps all women, simply from the fact of sex, were as much alike at moments as these seemed to be. Or did they even

seem? He was uncertain. He wondered whether they were very fond of each other. He supposed they must be. They were evidently very intimate, and had been for a long time, before Mrs. Ismey's marriage. To Felix they seemed on off-hand, casual terms. And yet, as there were moments in which he fancied a similarity of face or manner between them, so there were moments in which he seemed to divine some strong link that bound their diverse natures together, secretly but firmly, a link which they were so keenly aware of that they had no need to use in ordinary life the civilities, the tendernesses which are as the small change of the affections.

When Mrs. Ismey was with Lady Caroline she seemed to Felix slightly more of a nonentity than when she was away from her, and yet more physically charming. Lady Caroline was, he felt sure, the leading spirit of the two spirits. And he thought again of the canon played upon the two pianos.

'You are thinking a great deal about us to-night, Mr. Wilding,' Mrs. Ismey said towards the end of the dinner.

She spoke gaily, yet with a faint shadow of suspicion too.

'If I am, isn't it natural?' asked Felix, who already felt far less shy than when he first arrived in London.

'Yes; it is natural to think about us—but how?' she replied.

A look that was half mischievous, half inquisitive, had come into her face and made it almost childish.

'What does it matter how he thinks about us,' said Lady Caroline, 'or how we think about him? I 'm sure he doesn't care.'

'I am sure he does,' said Mrs. Ismey.

'Nonsense! Do you care?' Lady Caroline asked Felix, fixing her light eyes, which were still rather dull with the shadow of sleep, on him.

'Yes, I think I do,' he answered, almost ingenuously. 'I should like you to like me.'

'If I didn't like you, you wouldn't be sitting at this table,' said Lady Caroline brusquely. 'Think what you please about me. People's thoughts about me don't affect me at all.'

'If you are a monster you shouldn't show it,' said Mrs. Ismey quickly.

An expression that was both angry and helpless had suddenly come into her face.

'You ought to care what some people think,' she repeated insistently.

Lady Caroline turned and looked her full in the eyes.

'Well, I don't,' she said. 'I don't care what any one thinks.'

Her musical voice had become quite harsh. Felix felt as if he were witnessing an affray. He did not understand the cause of it at all, but he heard the clash of weapons, and saw gleams of anger and of determination in the eyes of the combatants.

Then were they enemies these two, not friends?

'Come,' said Lady Caroline, after a moment of silence, during which Mrs. Ismey looked down at her plate with her lips pressed tightly together. 'If we are going to hear this double-voiced nightingale we ought to start. I ordered the brougham at a quarter to ten.'

Mrs. Ismey got up quickly, as if movement were a relief to her.

'They'll bring you your coffee here,' Lady Caroline said to Felix. 'Join us in five minutes, will you?'

She treated him very much as a boy, and he noticed it, but did not mind. He felt sure she wished to be alone for a moment with Mrs. Ismey.

In the brougham he sat opposite to them on a little seat which could be let down flat against the front of the carriage, or pushed up and made firm on a pivot. In this seat, being tall, he found that he was uncomfortable unless he leaned forward. The night was dark and rather foggy, but the many street lamps and the passing carriage lamps cast gleams of light upon the two women as they sat side by side opposite to him. And he saw continually the lights, diminished, dancing in their eyes. They were too indolent or too sensible to attempt conversation, and Felix was glad of that. He looked at their eyes furtively, and thought what wonderful books the eyes of women are. Presently he was aware of a perfume in the carriage. It was faint and sweet. It made him suddenly feel sad, and vaguely amorous. Also it seemed to deepen his sense of the mystery there is in women. He could not tell whether the perfume was carried by Lady Caroline or Mrs. Ismey, but he thought it was probably Mrs. Ismey's. It was not quite like the perfume of any flower. He imagined it a scent of the East. It was languid and very delicate. He shut his eyes to draw it more acutely into his nostrils, and the sadness, and the pleasure of being sad, deepened in him until tears came into his eyes. He wondered why. He wondered what it all meant. And then again he looked at the eyes of the two women, and he thought that Lady Caroline's were fierce and dull, and that Mrs. Ismey's were brilliant like yellow precious stones. And he began to dream about them and their eyes, and to weave romances in which they figured with him. And these

romances were wild and sad, and quite impossible, as wild and sad and impossible as the London streets would be if they, and their figures, and the incidents which take place in them, were imagined instead of actually existing. But a carriage can roll through them, and so they are prosaic—to some people. Felix sighed when the lamps of the Standard Theatre glittered on his face.

When they were inside and had reached their box they found that the house was crammed with a lower middle-class audience. Girls with black cloth jackets, and hats covered with cheap, unnatural flowers and bright-coloured ribands, sat with glasses of beer on little stands before them, and giggled and talked with young men who wore caps and smoked cigars, or with soldiers in uniform. Elderly women in bonnets were there with solemn husbands in square-toed, creaking boots. There were many boys of from fourteen to twenty years old, who had made up parties to have a night out. They were in high spirits, sang the choruses of the songs with vigour, and made loud remarks, as befitted connoisseurs of feminine beauty, when a lady came on to the stage dressed in a Duchess of Devonshire hat, a golden wig, a *parure* of false diamonds, and a set of pink-and-silver tights. The lady smirked at them with an air of mechanical naughtiness, wagged her legs and sang about champagne, which she described as a wicked beverage that was very attractive to her Satanic nature. She was an immense success, throwing her hearers into ecstasies, in which they felt as if they too had shared in all the sinful joys of *Moet et Chandon.*

Lady Caroline looking, Felix thought, uncommonly like a tired image, leaned her arm on the ledge of the box, listened to the song with apparent attention, and when it was over said:

'This sort of thing makes me feel as if I were steeped in wickedness. What innocents the working classes are. They evidently think it a delicious crime to drink a glass of champagne. Just look at those boys, wriggling with criminal appreciation.'

The next turn was a boxing competition. A large, thin youth with a melancholy, pale face, and a very fat dwarf, with rosy cheeks and preposterously developed biceps, were the combatants. The dwarf had the best of it. His agility was extraordinary, and made the audience rock with laughter. He bobbed under the melancholy youth's guard and played a perfect rhapsody upon his pallid features. He hit up and caught him under the chin, sideways, and nearly broke his jaw. Every one was sincerely pleased. Finally he made a running leap and knocked the pale youth out. The house rang with cheers.

Mrs. Ismey looked bored. She was sitting to the left of Felix, who was between her and Lady Caroline, and she leaned back in her chair and scarcely glanced at the stage. Once or twice he turned towards her, when he was pleased and amused, and met eyes which made him feel very young. Once he said:

'You think I'm an idiot to laugh. I know you do.'

'No. I am wishing I could,' she replied. 'If you couldn't laugh, do you know that you would be only half as attractive as you are?'

He felt self-conscious and pleased. Did she think him attractive, then? In what way? He longed to ask her, for he knew nothing about his attractiveness: in what it consisted, how it acted, and on what sorts of people. Any Sandhurst boy could have given him a liberal education on that subject.

'Now we shall hear your friend,' said Lady Caroline to Felix.

'Happy Hal's' number had gone up. Felix felt nervous and extraordinarily anxious that Hal should sing well and be successful. The orchestra played some bars of 'Sally in our Alley,' and then Hal walked quietly on to the stage dressed in his workman's clothes, with his cap on his head, and the brown curl sticking out from under it. He looked, as he came on, as if he were walking alone in a field on a fine day. The audience applauded. He stood facing it with his hands in his flap pockets, and began gravely to sing in a clear, tenor voice. It was a very agreeable, natural voice, produced with ease and apparent simplicity. All the time he was singing Hal looked calmly at the crowd, without any shyness and without any conceit. He might have been looking at the grasses and buttercups in his field while he sang to please himself. And this absolutely quiet self-possession, that did not know it was self-possessed, made his performance original and charming. All the 'Sallies' in the theatre liked him without knowing why. When he came to the last verse of the song he stuck out his chin, rounded his little mouth, and sang it in a loud, penetrating, soprano voice ending with a soft, high note that was almost bird-like. The applause was tremendous. He took off his cap and showed his round, bullet-shaped head, covered with close-cropped, brown hair. But his gravity never changed, nor the odd, ruminating expression of his bright eyes. He stood there calmly while the orchestra played a bit of 'Tom Bowling.' While he was singing it he saw Felix, and gazed at him steadily, as he had gazed at him in the street.

'He is an odd chap,' said Lady Caroline. 'We will have him home to supper.'

Mrs. Ismey looked amused.

'Those corduroys in Great Cumberland Place!' she said.

'Why not? They'll make the house look almost respectable. Go and catch him, will you?' she added to Felix.

Hal had finished his 'turn' and was staring solemnly at the delighted audience cap in hand.

'Yes, certainly,' said Felix, rather amazed at this freak, and wondering whether Hal would come. It did not seem to occur to Lady Caroline that he might refuse.

Felix made his way out into Victoria Street, crossed it, and stood on the pavement facing the theatre where he had made Hal's acquaintance. After waiting about five minutes he saw Hal coming towards him, walking with his feet rather wide apart, and with his clay pipe stuck into his mouth. When he saw Felix he touched his curl without smiling.

'Good evening, guv'nor,' he said.

'Good evening,' said Felix. 'Your singing is simply capital.'

'They swallow it all right,' responded Hal. 'There was a lot wanting to treat me to-night, soldiers and young chaps out of shops. But I wasn't taking any.'

He puffed at his pipe, and stared across at the placard on which the names of the performers were printed.

'Name looks well, don't it, guv'nor?' he said after a pause, pointing with his pipe. 'Still on top.'

'Splendid!' said Felix. 'I say, you saw those two ladies with me in the box?'

'Was there two? I didn't take partic'lar notice.'

'Yes. Well, one of them told me to ask you if you would come to her house to-night to supper.'

Felix was surprised to find that he felt exceedingly diffident in approaching Hal with Lady Caroline's invitation; much more diffident than he would have been in asking a man in his own class.

'Couldn't do it, guv'nor,' said Hal gravely.

'Couldn't you? But—but why not?'

'The missus has come up.'

'The—your wife?'

'With the kids.'

'Really.'

'Ah! She got that anxious down to Dover about father she couldn't stick it. So up she came. Women is like that. Feared of the dangers o' London.'

He stared at Felix.

'Dangers for me!' he said. 'Funny, ain't it?'

'Yes. So you really can't come to-night?'

'Couldn't do it, guv'nor. Why, she's waiting supper for me!'

Evidently he thought the last statement was absolutely conclusive. Felix felt that it was quite useless to attempt any pressure. And, indeed, such was the quiet influence of Hal's unwavering decision of manner, that Felix unconsciously fell in with what was obviously his view, that a man whose wife was 'waiting supper' for him could not even discuss the possibility of remaining away from home, and breaking bread in the house of strangers.

'I see,' said Felix. 'Of course you can't come.'

'—— odd if I could, guv'nor, wouldn't it?' rejoined Hal, his favourite adjective.

'Well, good night,' said Felix heartily. 'We all enjoyed your singing.'

'Good night, guv'nor.'

He looked very hard at Felix and then said:

'Very glad to see you at 10 Emily Street, guv'nor, any time you're passing. Excuse the liberty. But you could see the missus and the kids now if you was to come.'

'Thank you very much. I will come. I should like to.'

'Right. Any day you're passing.'

He pulled his curl, and walked quietly away, puffing at his pipe.

Felix went back to the theatre.

'Well, where is he?' asked Lady Caroline.

Felix explained the position of affairs.

'So I'm refused!' said Lady Caroline, looking exactly the same as she did when she said 'Where is he?' 'Come along, Valeria. We three will have supper, anyhow. I ate nothing at dinner.'

Felix began to suggest that perhaps he had better go home as it was so late, but Lady Caroline cut him short.

'Oh, nonsense. And besides you must see Valeria safely to Green Street afterwards.'

'Oh, I shall be delighted,' said Felix honestly.

While they drove back to Great Cumberland Place Lady Caroline talked a good deal. As the night wore on she was gradually becoming more lively. She was evidently amused by the 'Happy Hal' episode.

'The man's a character,' she said. 'That chin of his means a lot. What does he earn?'

'I believe he said ten pounds a week,' said Felix.

'Five hundred a year. For a workman he's a millionaire. I wonder what his London *ménage* is like under the circumstances. It ought to be worth seeing. Do you suppose he lives as if he still had thirty shillings a week, or as if he were a rich man? Consider that chin and tell me.'

Felix considered Hal's chin, but could not form an idea.

'He has invited me to pay him a visit,' he said.

'Go,' said Lady Caroline. 'You'll be rewarded. Here we are.'

When they came into the light of the hall Felix noticed that she looked younger and much less fatigued, almost like a different woman. Indeed, the contrast between her present appearance and her appearance at dinner was quite extraordinary; almost unnatural, he thought. At the music-hall he had been too intent on the performance to observe her much. So now the transformation seemed to him to have taken place in a moment, and to be feverish. When they were at supper, and she had sent the man-servant out of the room, which she did almost directly, her animation, born out of the most ruthless and unashamed fatigue, the very nakedness of mental *ennui*, quite amazed him. She was talkative, and seemed now fully conscious of the influence of her companions, fully conscious of herself in relation to them. And when he heard her talk thus Felix began more thoroughly to understand why she was powerful, a personality that would make itself felt in any company.

She had a certain grimness of humour which was like the humour of a man who has seen so much, and at such close quarters, that he has become both sardonic and careless, but who cherishes quietly that internal smile in which the cynic warms himself. She also evidently had knowledge of many kinds, and showed it in haphazard fashion, as if entirely free from any desire either to impose it upon, or to share it with others. As he listened to her, Felix did not label her worldling, though she was certainly free, even audaciously free from religious prejudices, and seemed to yield obedience to no code of morals, or even of honour. Once or twice she spoke with obviously unassumed carelessness of things which most women think of as important, if not as sacred. Thus she alluded, almost with disgust, to the idea of motherhood, and seemed to think any kind of domesticity a horrible shackle on individual freedom. Felix wondered, youthfully, if she were a wicked woman. She could not be a good one, he thought. She puzzled him. At one moment he felt that there was something hateful in her, at another that she had a strong attraction for him.

Mrs. Ismey was permanently fascinating. But then she cared to be fascinating.

Both women ate more than at dinner, and when they got up from the table it was past twelve o'clock. Lady Caroline led the way to the room into which Felix had been shown on his arrival. A large fire was burning in the grate, and the atmosphere was very hot. The lamp with the red shade was burning dimly.

'Make yourself at home,' said Lady Caroline to Felix. 'Smoke—a pipe if you like. I don't mind.'

Felix wondered if she 'minded' anything.

She touched a bell. The footman came.

'Bring Chicho, please. You've put everything——?' She glanced round and saw a little table covered with bottles, glasses, and boxes.—'Yes. Then when you've brought Chicho you can go to bed.'

'Thank you, my lady.'

Felix felt sorry when he heard her order. The thought of the little black dog repelled him. He had quite forgotten Chicho till Lady Caroline mentioned him.

Mrs. Ismey had sat down near the fire. She held an unlighted cigarette in one hand, and was stretching out her other hand for a box of matches. The firelight danced over her face and made her bright, individual hair glitter.

'How is Chicho?' she asked.

'Oh, very happy. At least he was when I left him. We'll see when he comes.'

This time, as when they had spoken of the little dog before, Felix noticed something strange in their manner: in Mrs. Ismey's a sort of disgust and amusement mingled, a sort of curiosity too; in Lady Caroline's a brutality, and—well, he could only think of the word, relish.

'Has Chicho been ill?' he asked.

He heard a soft laugh from the sofa where Mrs. Ismey was sitting.

'Oh no,' Lady Caroline answered. 'But, you know, dogs have their moods like human beings. Haven't they, Valeria?'

'Chicho certainly has—now,' Mrs. Ismey replied.

She sighed. Felix looked quickly towards her, and thought he detected an expression of pain on her face. But if it were so, the expression died at once in a smile.

Just then the footman came in, carrying the little dog rather gingerly, as if afraid of being bitten. Lady Caroline lifted Chicho into her arms and bent down with him to the fire. The

yellow glow from the flames shone over her fat face and the bristling coat of the animal, which blinked, as if sleepy and dazzled by the light. He seemed to be in a better temper than when he was in Mrs. Ismey's house, but Felix still felt a horror of him. He could not understand the sensation, which he had never felt for any dog before.

But Chicho was not like other dogs.

'He's dreamy to-night,' Lady Caroline said. 'I'll put him in his basket. You see how dreamy and soothed he is,' she added to Mrs. Ismey, holding Chicho towards her.

Mrs. Ismey leaned quickly backward.

'Yes, yes, I can see quite well,' she answered hurriedly. 'Put him into his basket.'

Felix was sure that she shared his repulsion. Her movement and the tone of her voice showed it.

Lady Caroline went to a corner of the room, bent down, and came back without Chicho.

A shuffling noise was heard, followed in a moment by a sigh. Chicho was evidently settling himself again to the sleep from which he had been wakened.

CHAPTER XII

IT was two in the morning when Felix came out upon the broad step of Lady Caroline's house and whistled for a hansom. His cheeks were flushed. His eyes sparkled. His whole body was alive with the peculiar and feverish vitality that is born out of the dark hours and never visits man with the sun. No cabman responded at first to his call. He blew the whistle again and waited. The broad thoroughfare was dim and silent, but a long way off he saw lamps moving to and fro by the Marble Arch. The night breeze, which stirred softly, was full of the soul of autumn and of distant places. It was here, surely, to touch his cheek and depart. He felt its cool, moist fingers and shivered. The tonic purity of this breeze startled him as the sound of the Angelus bell heard in the garden of La Maison des Alouettes had startled him. He whistled again, long and shrilly. At last a cab came at a gallop, and drew up with a jerk before the door. Felix stepped back into the hall. Mrs. Ismey, wrapped in a long coat, lined and trimmed with fur, and with a high fur collar standing up round her face and hair, was standing at the door of the boudoir, talking earnestly in a low voice to Lady Caroline, who stood leaning against the wall with her hands behind her, and looking down at her feet. Felix waited. He did not like to interrupt them. The soft murmur of Mrs. Ismey's voice reached him. She had a great deal to say. He glanced at the faces of the two women. They looked very grave in the faint light of the hall. Mrs. Ismey stopped speaking at last. She put up her right hand, with a very natural gesture, and rested it on Lady Caroline's shoulder, as if to emphasise something, at the same time looking up into her friend's face. Lady Caroline, whose eyes were still cast down, shook her head without speaking. Mrs. Ismey made some quick, brief remark. Lady Caroline shook her head again. Then Mrs. Ismey dropped her hand and glanced towards Felix.

'Oh, is the cab there?' she said.

'Yes,' Felix answered.

'Then I'll come. Good night, Carrie.'

'Good night.'

Lady Caroline came lounging to the door and shook hands with Felix.

'Come and see me,' she said.

'Thank you, I will. I have so enjoyed this evening.'

She seemed quite struck by the energetic sincerity with which he spoke.

'Well, then, you must come and have another,' she said, almost genially.

A faint smile deepened the little holes on either side of her mouth.

Felix helped Mrs. Ismey into the cab and gave the address to the man. As they drove away he took off his hat to Lady Caroline, who was standing on the step looking, he thought, profoundly unconventional.

Directly they had started Mrs. Ismey said:

'I don't want to go home for a few minutes. I want some air. Tell him to drive a little way down the north side of the Park.'

'Yes,' said Felix eagerly.

He told the man through the little trap, and fancied he saw a grim smile on the shadowy section of face above him.

Mrs. Ismey sighed. Felix felt the warmth of her long coat against him, the softness of the sables. He noticed again the faint perfume he had smelt in the carriage. It was hers, then. Now it seemed to be gradually dying away, like some withdrawn, languorous melody, pushed towards silence by the light fingers of the breeze. And the perfume and the breeze were surely in antagonism, and communicated to him a sense of struggle, which was sad because it seemed to be of the essence of life and inevitable. He did not know it, but he must have sighed too, for Mrs. Ismey said:

'Do you feel unhappy—you?'

'I don't know. But why shouldn't I?'

'What can you have to be unhappy about?'

'Well, but I don't think one always wants a reason,' said Felix. 'Sometimes some little thing, like this coming suddenly into the air after being shut up in a room, makes me feel quite different. Don't you find that too?'

Instead of replying to the question, she said:

'My dear boy, if you want to be happy don't let yourself be imaginative.'

'But isn't it best to let oneself alone, and be just what one naturally is?' said Felix, thinking of King Marshall's brief

thoroughly, even unusually self-possessed. But, without understanding, he could pity from the bottom of his heart It seemed to him a long time before he heard her say:

'Tell the cabman to turn round, please.'

Felix obeyed.

'I want to go to Wigmore Street.'

'Wigmore Street!' said Felix, in astonishment.

'Yes. Number ——'

She gave a number.

Felix told the man to drive there. He was utterly bewildered. What could she be going to do at such an hour of night? They drove on for some time in silence. Felix looked out into the road. It was utterly deserted. Beyond the tall iron railings lay the blackness of the park. He could see the leafless branches of the trees which lined the path running parallel to the road. They looked most abominable, he thought, sinister and desolate. Their nakedness was hideous in the night. When the branches were still they were like something seen in a nightmare. When they moved it was as if one woke and found that the nightmare was a reality.

He shivered.

'Why do you do that?' said Mrs. Ismey, almost in her usual voice.

'I don't know. It's the cold, I suppose.'

'When we get to Wigmore Street I don't wish you to get out of the cab.'

'No.'

'Just sit still. I shan't be long.'

She stopped speaking. Then she went on:

'Of course you think this very odd, but it isn't really. I'm only going to a chemist.'

'Oh, you're not ill!'

He looked at her again. The ugliness had not quite left her face, whose features looked much harder than usual, but there were no traces of tears.

'I don't feel particularly well. But it's nothing to bother about. This chemist knows me and can give me something to do me good.'

'I see.'

'I may be with him a few minutes.'

'Oh, I don't mind how long I wait,' said Felix earnestly. 'Please don't think about me. I'm only awfully sorry for you. I mean your being ill like this.'

'You're a kind, dear boy,' she said.

She put her gloved hand on his for a moment. Felix felt his pulses beating and the blood rushed to his forehead. He kept his hand quite still under hers, and thought how wonderfully light a woman's hand is. Mrs. Ismey's was almost like a bird resting on him, and when she took it away he felt as if he saw the flight of the bird. They were in the dark streets now. The cabman elected to reach Wigmore Street by a tortuous slum, that looked like the back of a mews. He turned several sharp corners. One of the wheels grazed a post. Mrs. Ismey shut her two hands down tightly on the apron of the cab.

'I'm abominably nervous to-night,' she said. 'Why does he go this way? Oh, we are close now.'

The cab stopped at last before a silent, shuttered house, at a corner. One light burned behind a red glass lamp. Under it there was a bell-handle. Mrs. Ismey got out of the cab quickly and furtively.

'I won't be long,' she whispered.

As she stepped in front of Felix to reach the pavement she had touched his hand again. She rang the bell. There was a long interval of silence. Felix heard the cabman clear his throat and shift on his perch. The horse drooped its head and the reins hung loose. Mrs. Ismey, who stood with her back turned to the street, pulled the bell again, and Felix saw her lift her face as if she were looking up at the windows of the house, which were all dark. A feeble gust of wind came down the street. It caught a bit of white paper and sent it creeping over the pavement. Felix followed it with his eyes. It stopped, shook, crept on again, like a livid thing that was alive. He saw Mrs. Ismey's arm move violently as she pulled the bell for the third time. A minute or two elapsed. Then the door opened noiselessly and the vague figure of a man partially appeared. Mrs. Ismey made a forward movement. The figure disappeared. She followed it and the door shut noiselessly.

Felix began to feel as if he were in a dream, and although nothing dreadful had happened, he felt as if the dream were very horrible, full of blackness, hidden things, despair. The silence of London by night appalled his imagination. This crowd of tall, dark houses, stretching away on all sides, voiceless, mysterious, sent a cold shudder through him, now that he had seen one of them open, like a creature with a mouth, and swallow up Mrs. Ismey. The vague figure of the man suggested formless terrors to him. What manner of man was he? Was she safe shut up there with him? The time seemed very long. What could be happening? The red lamp was like a bloodshot

eye keeping watch before an ambush. He heard the cabman moving about and coughing. The horse shook itself as horses shake themselves when they are frightfully over-tired. There was a sound of distant footsteps far down the street. They were quick and pattering and drew rapidly near. Felix hoped Mrs. Ismey would not come out till they had passed. He hated the idea of her being seen by any one coming from that house in the dead of the night. Presently the footsteps stopped. Felix listened, but did not hear them again. He wondered why they had stopped, whether some one was standing near in the dark, waiting, as he was waiting, to see the door of the black house open. After a minute or two he began to feel certain that some one was watching. He leaned forward over the apron, which he had closed after Mrs. Ismey got out, turned his head and looked down the street in the direction from which the sound of the footsteps had come. But he saw no one, nothing but the vista of the street, the two lines of houses drawing together in the distance, the two lines of lamps diminishing in the darkness.

All the rest of his life he wondered, now and then, who had pattered down Wigmore Street that night, what manner of human being, intent on what nocturnal errand.

As he leaned back once more in the cab the chemist's door noiselessly opened again, and Mrs. Ismey glided swiftly out. Felix hurriedly pushed back the apron. She was by his side in an instant.

'Now, Green Street,' she said, in a low voice.

As they drove off the chemist's door closed. This time Felix had seen no vague figure in the aperture. The opening and shutting were apparently automatic. Mrs. Ismey did not speak. Nor did Felix. He was sitting by a mystery, but it was no business of his to ask questions of the mystery. He had quite forgotten that he had meant to find out from his companion why she had required of him the sacrifice of a possible career. All thought of his affairs, his life, had left him. He was pre-occupied with hers. Neither of them said a word till the cab turned into Green Street. Then Mrs. Ismey moved to put her hand into some recess of her long fur coat. She drew it out holding a latch-key, and then looked at Felix. Her eyes were shining.

'It's hardly necessary to ask you, I know,' she murmured, 'but I don't want you ever to mention my visit to Wigmore -eet to-night. People always think such absurd things about 's health—especially husbands.'

Of course I never will,' said Felix.

The horse stopped.

'Good night,' she said. 'You've been very nice to me. No, sit still.'

She squeezed his hand, putting the palm of her hand upon the back of his, and closing her fingers for an instant till they were in his palm. And, somehow, this farewell seemed to Felix almost like a caress, and quite different from the conventional touch of hand with hand.

A moment later she had vanished into her house without looking back.

CHAPTER XIII

IN the dawn of that morning Felix sat writing to his mother. He had found it impossible to go to sleep. Indeed, when he lay down in bed, the excitement of his mind increased. A torrent of thought rushed through his brain and he felt like one hot with fever. He got up again, dressed, walked about his little sitting-room. The Chinese idols, propped up with their wedges of folded paper, stared at him with their narrow eyes, as if humorously surprised by his nocturnal activity. Felix thought sarcasm lurked in their immobile faces, and remembered the satire in Mrs. Ismey's eyes on the evening of his first meeting with her. He had been half afraid of her then. He had never thought that he could pity her. Yet now he did pity her. For what? He did not know. But he felt that there was something dreary and dreadful in her life. That ugly change in her face, a change which she had wished to hide, could only have been caused by some deep-seated, strongly rooted ill. He wondered what that ill was, whether it was physical. Perhaps she suffered from one of those torturing bodily persecutions which render the lives of so many human beings a burden. If so, did Mr. Ismey know it? Was it, perhaps, that knowledge which had set the perpetual sorrow in his eyes? With an almost furious rapidity Felix reconsidered the whole of his short acquaintance with Mrs. Ismey, searching for the truth of her grief. He recalled the curious incident in the garden, when she had sent him away for a moment to look in at the drawing-room window. He had never understood that, nor the very marked physical change which had followed her instant of solitude. Understood——! What did he understand in her? Anything? Once more an almost passionate anger at his ignorance surged into his heart. To get away from it he sat down to write to his mother.

At least he understood her. The thought of her simplicity was soothing just then, and presently brought back to him some of the old, pleasant sense of superiority which had been his companion at La Maison des Alouettes when he dissected

Grand'mere, and, later, at Churston Waters. And, being soothed, he wrote a letter that was not wholly impatient. Nevertheless it was firm. He said to his mother—he thought in very convincing and excellent language—that a man must stand or fall by his own will, that he must be a free agent if he is to be a man at all, that he cannot be governed in his choice of a life by women if he is to preserve his self-respect. Not even a mother can think for him. The burden of the letter was 'Trust me.' Perhaps because he was really tired, though he did not know it, and in a condition of nervous excitement, Felix was carried away, intoxicated by his own prose. At any rate his letter seemed to him a most manly and even touching composition. He begged his mother to learn to rely on him a little more, and said that, if she did so, he was the more likely to prove himself worthy of her reliance. It was difficult, he said further, to do what was right if one were always suspected of being about to do what was wrong. As he went on, developing this idea in the small and silent hours, he came to think that his mother had really injured him in her thought and that he was being almost nobly magnanimous. Without conceit, he felt as he sealed the letter that he was a fine fellow. He had not forgotten to say that Stephen was not his ruler, and must not interfere in his affairs. The labour of composition left him conscious that the night was meant for rest and was over. He undressed, went to bed, and at last was able to fall asleep. When his servant called him he felt as if the night had only just begun, sent the man away and slept again till nearly one o'clock. He had breakfast instead of lunch, and faced a day that seemed thoroughly disorganised. He longed to go and call on Mrs. Ismey, but did not like to, fearing to be intrusive or a bore. Finally he went out and left cards on three sets of people to whom he had introductions. It was only four o'clock when this social task was accomplished, and as he walked away from the third house, which was in Cadogan Square, he was suddenly overwhelmed with depression at having no tie of work in London. It was awful to think of drifting on, perhaps for months, with no regular occupation to fill his day and make the evening a delightful contrast of ease. He remembered, actually for the first time, that he had never asked Mrs. Ismey that question, why she had deprived him of the advantage offered to him by her husband. Should he go and ask her now? He stood for a moment at the corner of Sloane Street hesitating. Then he made up his mind that he had no right to call again so soon, that it would be a solecism, and would perhaps be regarded as

prints upon the walls. One showed a stout lady in a pelisse and white stockings being upset out of a coach upon a desolate moor. Another represented John Gilpin at the most acute stage of his troubled career. The third was a portrait of Queen Victoria riding with the Iron Duke.

Felix waited. His sense of the joy of life was decidedly on the wane. The folding-doors were ajar, and he could not help hearing a slight rustling and sound of suppressed whispering in the inner room. He fixed his eyes upon the lady in the pelisse, whose mouth was a round O of agony, and thought how ghastly existence must be in such a room.

'Glad to see you, guv'nor,' said a firm voice, and Happy Hal emerged from the inner room and shut the folding-doors carefully behind him.

Felix felt a sense of relief. He shook hands with Hal, who looked at him with an unflinching serenity which, apparently, never changed.

'Sit down, guv'nor,' continued Hal, placing one of the arm-chairs before the grate, which was filled with a white-and-gold paper parasol. 'Glad to see you.'

Felix sat down and Hal took a seat opposite. He had discarded his workman's costume, and wore a black-and-white check suit and brown boots.

'Ah,' he continued, seeing that Felix had noticed this fact, 'funny thing, ain't it, guv'nor, the missus can't get used to it. Every night, when I puts on the others to go to the Hall, she says, "Hal," she says, "now you're yourself." But, in my position, it don't do to go walking about London in 'em, does it, guv'nor?'

He spoke quite without conceit, with an air of simple knowledge of his situation.

'Certainly not,' said Felix. 'And how does your wife like being in London?'

Hal pursed up his small mouth and slightly shook his cropped head.

'She doesn't like it?'

'Well, guv'nor, you see she's strange to it, and she ain't got the hang of it yet, as you might say. She's that confused with it she gets angry like. And then she will have it as London's a wicked place.'

Hal paused. His large, brown hands were lying upon his sturdy knees, palm downward. He lifted one of them and dropped it down again on his check trouser.

'A —— wicked place, guv'nor,' he said, using his adjective.

Felix could not help smiling at his earnestness.

'Well, I suppose it is,' he said.

'And ain't there any wickedness in Dover?' asked Hal. 'Ain't there, guv'nor?'

'Oh, of course there is.'

'That's what I tell her, guv'nor. I says to her, "Go where you will, Anne," I says, "there's wickedness." But there, she will have it there's no wickedness like there is in London.'

'Perhaps she'll get more accustomed to it presently,' said Felix, in an almost severely grave voice.

'That's what I says, but she says, "I don't want to get used to no wickedness," she says. Funny things women.'

Hal heaved a sigh. His face wore always a calm and ruminating expression, but it was evident that he was slightly worried. Felix was about to offer some further attempt at consolation when the folding-doors were opened a very little way, and a small, thin woman initiated herself into the room with a sort of fluttered precaution, as if, though under some compulsion she presented herself to the view of the two people in the parlour of the 'double,' she wished to remain as unobserved as, under the circumstances, was possible.

Mrs. Blake was one of those extraordinarily respectable-looking little women who are only found in so-called humble life. No lady, however virtuous, however self-respecting, could have achieved her peculiar expression of wary decency, could have moved with the pinched and cautious propriety which was characteristic of her. She was a clean, careful, conscious little body, with smooth brown hair and small pointed features of the nut-cracker type, neat and not inexpressive, anxious but not ill-natured grey eyes under faint, light eyebrows, small hands and feet, and rather sharp shoulder-blades and elbows. Many women of her type look shrewish. Mrs. Blake looked merely as if she were, by nature, highly strung.

When she saw Felix she dropped a small curtsey, and smoothed the front of what was evidently her best gown, a lavender merino with a wandering white riband on it, with anxious fingers. Felix got up quickly and shook hands with her. He did not exactly know why, but he felt at once a strong sympathy with this small, spare hostess in her furnished London parlour. Perhaps he guessed how much more at home she used to feel in her Dover kitchen. Hal said, in his powerful voice, "Mrs. Blake, guv'nor," and they all three sat down again facing the white-and-gold paper parasol. Mrs. Blake looked at it firmly, and kept on smoothing the lavender merino with her small hands, which

it was easy to see had had plenty to do with the washtub in former days.

'I've been hearing your husband sing,' said Felix, to begin conversation. 'He sings splendidly.'

'Hal was always a musician, sir,' said Mrs. Blake, in a thin, company voice.

'His singing must be a great pleasure to you.'

'Yes, sir, we all set great store by it,' said Mrs. Blake.

She gave a slight cough, folded her hands and added:

'At Dover, sir.'

'Now, Anne,' said Hal, with a tinge of reproach in his pleasant voice, 'you know it ain't no different here.'

'I didn't say so, Hal. I said to the gentleman we all set great store by your singing at Dover. And so we did.'

Hal seemed about to say something, for he opened his mouth, but he closed it again without uttering a word. Mrs. Blake fixed her anxious eyes firmly on the paper parasol, and added reflectively:

'I'm sure your mates thought the world and all of you at Dover, Hal.'

'There's more to think about me in London, Anne,' said her husband.

'Maybe there is and maybe there isn't,' she replied.

'She can't see as how it's more when folk like a chap in London, guv'nor, than what it is when they like him in Dover,' said Hal, addressing himself to Felix. 'But there is a difference, ain't there?'

'Oh yes, Mrs. Blake,' said Felix. 'When London likes any one it means that he would be appreciated anywhere in the world.'

Mrs. Blake looked quite unconvinced, but she replied respectfully, though formally:

'I'm very glad you say so, sir, and if it pleases Hal for London folk to come after him.'

'Anne will have it that I like 'em staring at me as they do, guv'nor,' interposed Hal. 'It ain't a bit of good me telling 'er as it's part of the show. I can't sing to 'em from behind the "drop," can I now?'

'Oh, come, Mrs. Blake, I'm sure you're really proud of your husband's making such a success up here,' said Felix cheerfully.

He felt that Hal looked to him as an ally, and relied upon him to bring Mrs. Blake to a proper appreciation of their admirable situation.

'Why,' he continued, 'just think of what it means. Think of money he earns.'

'Yes, I know, sir,' she replied, still in the same unconvinced voice.

She shot a glance of mysterious and complicated suspicion towards the door, looked at her husband, pursed her lips and said:

'That girl don't bring the tea, you see, Hal.'

'Now please don't order anything for me,' Felix began.

'We hope you'll take a cup of tea, sir,' said Mrs. Blake, with a sort of steadfast hospitality. 'Not as we get it here like I can make it, though I says it myself.'

'Her brew is A1, sir,' threw in Hal, evidently anxious to propitiate his wife. 'But, as we are now, I don't like her going down in the kitchen.'

'Oh, I wouldn't go, not in this kitchen,' said Mrs. Blake, with sudden vivacity. 'I never knew any girl to be so slow, Hal.'

At this moment there was the sound of a clattering of crockery and a stumbling step outside. A pause followed, and a prolonged fumbling at the handle of the door. Mrs. Blake tucked in her lips, till her mouth looked like a purse, drawn together in the old-fashioned way by a riband. All her features seemed to Felix to become suddenly more nut-cracker in type.

'Why ever don't she come in, Hal?' she inquired, as if asking for information about some savage animal from the keeper of a menagerie.

He made a movement as if to get up, but before he could do so the door was burst open, and disclosed a view of the back of the slatternly servant, with the worn heel of the slipper which, with the foot inside it, had just been applied to the wood, presented uncompromisingly to the eyes of the assembled company. Mrs. Blake turned down one corner of her mouth, and cast a look of searching interrogation at her husband, while the servant swung awkwardly round, and shuffled into the room bearing a japanned tray, which she set down with a bang and a rattle upon the table. She then, after a loud sneeze, proceeded to the sideboard, opened a drawer and extracted a tablecloth.

'Why ever don't she lay the cloth before setting that down there?' whispered Mrs. Blake to Hal. 'She'll only have to take it—I never knew such a gal to sneeze.'

The servant was delivering herself of a striking, and even sensational demonstration, while shaking out the cloth in airy, round-backed waves. Having at length in some degree recovered herself, she advanced to the table and began to put the cloth on it. Mrs. Blake's face was a study during this proceeding. A keen severity appeared upon it, combined with a

fastidiously critical expression which quite transformed her, turning her—so Felix thought—into a being almost painfully intelligent. The servant, who was evidently quite unconcerned, obsessed by her tremendous cold, laid the cloth up to the tray, and then paused, snuffling, to consider what course to pursue, whether to remove the tray to the sideboard or to heave it up and get the cloth under it.

'Whatever's she going to do now, Hal?' whispered Mrs. Blake. 'Why ever don't she——?'

At this moment the girl came to a decision, lifted the tray partially up with one hand and shoved the tablecloth under it with the other. Some tea ran out round the lid of the over-full teapot and slopped into the tray.

'T'ch, t'ch, t'ch, t'ch,' went Mrs. Blake.

She was turning to cast-iron. The girl set the table, slightly protruding her tongue as she calculated the distances that ought to stretch between the plates. When she had finished she said, in the husky alto voice:

'Tea's ready.'

'Wherever's the buttered toast, Hal?' said Mrs. Blake to her husband, still in the same stage whisper.

It was evident that she regarded the girl as some strange and untoward phenomenon, as to whose habits and customs she could not even make a guess, whose reasons for doing or for leaving undone this or that were altogether beyond her.

'Where's the buttered toast, Mary?' asked Hal.

The girl glanced round the table with a lack-lustre eye.

'Ain't I brought ut?' she said.

'No, you ain't!' said Mrs. Blake sharply, addressing her for the first time.

'I s'pose I must a' left ut in the kitchen, then,' responded the girl without emotion. 'I'll go and see.'

She made a fatigued exit.

'Why ever should she leave it in the kitchen, Hal?' inquired Mrs. Blake.

'I dunno, Anne,' said Hal. 'But she's got a bit of a cold. Will you sit to the table, guv'nor?'

They all three drew up to the table. Mrs. Blake was at the head of it before the plated teapot. It was evident that she was far too deeply engaged in the exercise of the critical faculty to take any share for the moment in general conversation. It seemed to Felix that her thin figure had grown thinner, her small, pointed features sharper under the stress of the mental activity which consumed her at this, to her, most painful moment. She

lifted the lid and darted a piercing glance of inquiry into the pot. There was a silence while the two men watched her. Then she dropped the lid and said to Hal:

'If she hasn't left in this morning's leaves, Hal!'

The criminal laziness of London was surely summed up and securely enshrined in that one sentence as uttered by Mrs. Blake. There was no more to be said, and Hal evidently knew it, for he formed his lips into a round O, as if about to whistle, fixed his bright eyes on his wife, and shook his bullet head without a word, while she, with a face of stone and the rigid hand of utter disillusion, poured the black and stewy liquid into three cups and added sugar and milk. As she finished, the girl, once more a-sneeze, re-entered with a plate containing buttered toast cut into lozenge form. She put it down on the table and then glanced at Mrs. Blake.

'Wotever is ut?' she said.

She obtained no reply. Mrs. Blake was entirely concentrated upon the toast, which seemed, from the moment of its advent, to exercise a species of awful fascination over her. She looked at it from various angles, and each glance appeared to deepen the impression which it had made upon her. Of the nature of that impression there could scarcely be any doubt. Even the girl was struck and slightly awed by her demeanour.

'Wot's wrong?' inquired the girl, again protruding her tongue and beginning to squint.

Mrs. Blake diminished the size of her mouth till that feature was infinitesimal.

'Ain't I cut ut right?' continued the girl. 'Don't ut do?'

'It'll have to do,' said Mrs. Blake, with an awful look at the girl.

'Well, that's 'ow I always cuts ut,' said the girl, with a certain doggedness.

'I dessay,' rejoined Mrs. Blake, in a thin voice. 'I dessay.'

''Ow would you want ut?' continued the girl, squinting more than ever. 'Would you 'ave ut cut round?'

'Never mind,' said Mrs. Blake, looking at Hal as if to draw his attention to her Christianity. 'It don't matter how I'd have it. It don't matter at all.'

'Oh, very well,' said the girl sulkily. 'I'm sure some's difficult to please.'

She turned, and went out sneezing.

When the door was shut Mrs. Blake handed the toast to Felix, who took two slices with a deliberate, and perhaps slightly forced air of satisfaction.

'Why, Mrs. Blake,' he said, 'I'm sure it's very good. After all, whatever way it's cut it tastes the same, doesn't it?'

But here Hal interposed with an air of conviction.

'The missus is right, guv'nor,' he said. 'There is things as they don't know in London. It should be cut in rounds.'

This definite backing-up of her opinion had a mollifying effect upon Mrs. Blake, and conversation became slightly easier. Felix asked after the two children, and was told that they were asleep in the next room.

'You see, guv'nor,' explained Hal, 'my coming back of a night disturbs 'em. They can't make out what Daddy's up to. At Dover me and the missus was mostly abed come nine.'

'And now if you don't have to start out come ten,' said Mrs. Blake with a sniff. 'Nice hours they keep in London.'

This remark led to a more open discussion of the metropolis, and drew from Mrs. Blake some expression of her fears for Hal in his new profession.

'It's the drink I'm afraid of, sir,' she explained frankly to Felix.

'Now, Anne,' said her husband, 'you know I never take a glass too much.'

'Not yet you don't, Hal,' she assented. 'I know that. But who's to say you never will, with one wanting you to take a glass here and another there. You say yourself as it's drink, drink, drink at the Halls, and every feller there ready to treat you if you but say the word.'

'Ah, but I don't never say the word.'

'Not yet you don't,' said Mrs. Blake, with significance.

She was evidently by nature an anxious little body, who had been thrown into a permanent condition of acute uneasiness by the abrupt change in her husband's fortunes. Felix, who honestly felt sure that her fears were groundless, strove to reassure her, and even told her of his mother's fears for him.

'You know, Mrs. Blake,' he said, 'your husband and I came up to London nearly at the same time.'

'You're not at the Halls, sir,' said Mrs. Blake. 'Are you?'

Felix could not help smiling.

'No. But I'm certain there's no more danger for him in London than there is for me. We'll both make our fortunes, and then my mother and you will be obliged to own that you needn't have been so anxious about us.'

He spoke cheerfully, but at that moment he was secretly envying Hal, who had a position, a profession, success, all that tends to make a man at home in a great city. Then he got up to go.

'Oh, I'm sure, sir,' said Mrs. Blake respectfully, 'for a gentleman like you London is the proper place. I hope you don't think as I——'

'No, no. But I'd answer for your husband as I would for myself. And I hope he'd do the same for me.'

Hal looked quietly gratified.

'The missus 'll settle down all right presently,' he said.

He smiled for the first time since Felix had called, and added: 'Miss your kitchen, don't you, missus?'

Mrs. Blake looked down and twisted the front of the merino dress between her fingers. Her pointed features began suddenly to work. Felix hastily, but with warm cordiality, bade her good-bye, and promised to call again. He felt his sympathy with her deepen. Standing there in the ugly room, which symbolised her rise in the world, but which she evidently regarded with wonder and alarm, she looked very forlorn. The fact that she had on her best gown intensified the little tragedy. A tear fell on her thin cheek as she dropped her small, respectful courtesy.

'Thank you, sir,' she murmured.

Hal escorted Felix to the door. He was evidently concerned.

'She don't cotton to London, guv'nor, and that's the truth,' he said. 'Even the ten quid a week don't seem to make it up to 'er for leaving Dover. You see, she was born and bred there. She'd rather have me back at the harbour and lose the money, I do b'lieve—funny, guv'nor, ain't it?'

As Felix walked away he was conscious that Hal's final remark accurately summed up a good many situations. When he reached home he found a letter lying upon his table. The envelope was covered with spots of ink. He opened it and saw Mrs. Ismey's name at the end. The letter was an invitation to dinner.

'DEAR MR. WILDING,—I have a kind of intuition that you may call to-day, but in case you don't, and to be properly formal, I send this to tell you that my husband and I hope you will come and dine next Saturday at eight. Mr. Marshall, the novelist, is coming, and one or two others. What do you say? You see, my husband isn't mortally offended by your refusal to become office-boy!—Yours very sincerely, VALERIA ISMEY.

'*P.S.*—I love driving at night with the right person.'

Felix flushed as he finished reading the note. He laid it down. Then he took it up again, and sat for a long time

holding it in his hand. The writing was extraordinary. At first he thought that it was like the caligraphy of some one who had written in sleep as people talk in sleep. The lines were uneven. Some sloped up, some down. Several words were illegible. He guessed what they were from the context. The half-formed, straggling letters suggested terrible weakness, weariness. There were many ugly smears of ink too. He remembered the tramp table in Mrs. Ismey's pretty drawing-room. This note must have been written on it. But that table and this infirm writing, disfigured by black stains, seemed so unlike her that he imagined her dictating the note to some half-tipsy amanuensis.

Then he thought of the nocturnal visit to Wigmore Street, and was filled once more with a vague feeling of uneasiness.

CHAPTER XIV

FELIX had thought of going home to Churston Waters that week from Saturday to Monday. Mrs. Ismey's note drove the idea away at once. He wrote an acceptance of the invitation, and then once more went out, simply because he felt utterly restless. That peculiar, uneasy desire for perpetual movement which invades so many souls in great towns, and which is so painful because it is so objectless, was beginning to steal through him. It was a very black evening, still and sombre, and, as he walked, loneliness seemed to close in on him like darkness on waste land. A fierce longing seized him to have some occupation in this mighty city seething with occupations, to have some task, however hard, however fatiguing, to which he would go each day, to which he would be obliged to devote that energy of youth which was gathering in him, was rising like water behind a dam. The omnibuses rolled by. They were crowded with workers going home to their earned rest: with tired clerks and city men, with plainly dressed girls and women who gained their livelihood by their own efforts. The sight of those working women made Felix feel ashamed, effeminate, unworthy, and undignified. God had not given to him the temperament of the idler. Suddenly he knew that, knew it so absolutely that his heart cried out to him against his life, and grew sick within him at the thought of its continuance. Mr. Ismey was right. Work is a guardian angel. Work turns the wilderness into a garden. Work sometimes does what even love cannot do, roots a man firmly in his place in the world, and gives him the blessed sensation: 'This plot of ground in the wide immensity of earth was meant for me to grow in.'

To-night Felix wanted to take root, to grow. The desolation of his idleness tortured him, as he walked onward in the dark among the crowd of the workers, who had finished their long day of energy and were looking, as they had a right to look, gladly towards their rest.

Without being conscious of the direction in which he was

'The Pav.?'

'The Pavilion Music Hall, my neophyte. And to-morrow I have to enshrine my impressions in a chatty, bright article such as would rejoice the readers of the *Daily Telegraph*. Beastly hard, isn't it?'

Felix laughed again. Arliss echoed him, and the dinner bargain was struck on the spot.

When Felix was once more alone, he began eagerly to consider this new idea. It came in a golden light to him. A most beneficent Providence had surely brought about his meeting with Arliss that evening. The thought of work, of having a place to go to each morning, an end in view, a number of young companions to exchange ideas with wrought him up into a state of enthusiasm. London suddenly appeared to him as a blessed, even as a cosy city. He looked at the returning crowds of the workers, and they were no longer people apart from him, to be envied from afar, but his brothers, his sisters. The fact that he had never seen Sam, that he knew nothing of his qualifications to be a guide in the ways of literature, of his honesty of purpose, or indeed anything about him save that he wore wonderful coats, did not trouble Felix at all. Sam was a lifebuoy flung by Arliss to him alone in the great sea. He had the power to grasp the lifebuoy, and he meant to use it.

There was much to think of to-night. He hurried home to dress for dinner, feeling as if all the lives in life were seething, burning, blossoming in his one body. What a glorious thing excitement was, and such a sense of acute vitality. He added more fuel to the furnace of his desire that evening with the jovial Arliss, and learnt more about the coats of the inspiring Samuel. The next morning, at about twelve—having already despatched a letter to his mother to tell her of his new project—he went by the underground railway to the Temple Station, got out there, and in five minutes was standing before the big building, full of various offices, in which Mr. Carringbridge instructed his pupils. The school was on the third floor. Felix went up in a lift, which was controlled by a very impudent-looking, and exceedingly fat little boy, with curly, fair hair, who was attired in a blue uniform, and who hummed continuously as he allowed the cord to quiver between his dirty fingers. When the lift stopped, he gave a smirk, and pointed down a corridor to a door, half of which was ground glass. On the glass was painted in huge black letters: 'Mr. Samuel Carringbridge's School of Journalism.' Felix wondered what the fat little boy meant by the smirk as he walked down the corridor. When he

reached the door he knocked on the wooden margin that framed the ground glass. He heard a hubbub of voices beyond, and a peal of laughter. No one told him to come in, so he knocked again much harder. This time a loud, bass voice roared out:

'*Come* in!'

He pushed the door, and found himself in a big room, furnished with three long tables and a quantity of chairs, on which were sitting in various attitudes of merry idleness several young men, who all stared very hard at him as he entered. Most of them were smoking. Several had pens in their hands. Felix thought there must be about ten of them, but he had no time to count, for one of them, a youth with a waxy white complexion and sand-coloured hair, got up at once and said to him mellifluously:

'Do you wish to see Mr. Carringbridge?'

'Yes, please,' said Felix.

'I will inquire if it can be managed,' said the youth very gravely; 'if you can put up with my leaving you for just one moment?'

He spoke the last sentence with an air of earnest inquiry.

'Oh yes, I can, thanks,' replied Felix, feeling much inclined to laugh.

'And if you don't mind using another person's chair, mine is quite at your service,' added the youth politely.

As he said the last words he lifted up the chair from which he had just risen and dropped it down behind Felix, just touching his calves.

'By the mere depression of your body you will be on it now,' he remarked, with an air of gentlemanly and quiet satisfaction. Then he bowed, and walked demurely through a doorway, that was set in a wooden screen some six and a half feet high at the left angle of the room. This screen protected a door on which he was immediately heard to knock.

'Come in!' called a very suave, sweet voice.

The command was evidently obeyed, for Felix heard a soft murmur of two voices. He had sat down on the sandy youth's chair, and looked round at the young men, who were now all bending over sheets of foolscap, and were either writing busily or thinking profoundly with pens in their hands. Hugo Arliss was not among them. Perhaps he was taking a holiday after the hard work of the previous evening. Felix thought that most of Mr. Carringbridge's pupils looked gentlemanly and agreeable. One, however, specially attracted his attention, not because these pleasant qualities seemed to attach to him. This was a man who looked about forty, with an extraordinary face,

free scope. About ink there is less divergence of opinion, and mine, I believe, gives general satisfaction. I am glad if it is so. I never drive the young.'

'No?' said Felix.

'Never. I lead them, perhaps. I show them what a man can do, has done. You see the volumes on that table?'

Mr. Carringbridge indicated with his snowy forefinger an oval table of walnut wood, upon which lay a number of very large books bound in red leather.

'Yes,' said Felix.

'Those contain the leading articles written by me for the *Daily Recorder* during twenty-five years of active journalistic life. My pupils can read them at any time.'

'You must have worked tremendously hard,' said Felix, counting the volumes.

There were eight of them, and they were tremendously fat. He felt almost awe-stricken. Mr. Carringbridge indulged himself and Felix in a lotus-eating smile.

'I have been through the mill,' he replied lazily. 'I have seen, known, handled life myself, and have presented it to others in a series of pictures glowing, I hope, with actuality. Life, I suppose, has few secrets from me.'

An expression of serene innocence had stolen into his face. Felix now began to notice a very characteristic habit of his, a habit of apparently contradicting his words by his looks. If he spoke of energy he usually looked lethargic. If he talked of life having no secrets from him, his eyes became like those of an ignorant saint.

'If my pupils like to take me as an example they would do well to follow,' he continued, 'they can. I come up from Brighton every day by the nine o'clock train. But I never drive them. I trust them. I rely on them. I give them complete liberty. When do you propose to come?'

Again Felix jumped. Mr. Carringbridge's transitions were abrupt, and seemed to be emphasised by the fact that the purring sweetness of his voice did not alter when he changed the topic of discussion.

'Oh, I thought at once,' Felix said.

'You have your cheque-book with you?'

'Oh no.'

'If you like to hand me a cheque to-morrow morning you can enroll yourself among my pupils to-morrow morning. Here is my prospectus'—he handed a paper languidly to Felix—'study it if you like. Everything that is stated there is yours

for one year for one hundred guineas. I sit here during each day at the absolute disposal of my pupils. They are at liberty to come in—after knocking—at any and at every moment. My only wish is to serve them, to place before them, if so desired, not otherwise, the ripe fruit of a mind stored with twenty-five years of experience. But I do not force them. You can pay me a hundred guineas, sit in that room for a year, and only exchange a "good morning" with me, if you are a damned fool.'

He cooed the concluding words and got up softly.

'If you like to come here to-morrow and give me a hundred guineas you will find me sitting here quite ready to receive them,' he said kindly.

'Thanks very much,' Felix said. 'It's awfully good of you.'

'Not at all. And if you prefer to stay away, I wish you all success and happiness.'

He beamed on Felix with the tenderest cordiality, clasped his hand with fingers as soft as satin, and conducted him gently to the door. Opening it, he let in a roar of conversation, which abruptly ceased as he preceded Felix into the 'writing-hall.' There he once more pressed his hand in full view of the young men.

'Good-bye, good-bye, Mr. Wilding,' he said. 'It has been a great pleasure to see you here.'

'Good-bye. Thank you very much,' said Felix.

Mr. Carringbridge released his hand and he made his way out. As he pushed the farther door he glanced back, and saw Mr. Carringbridge standing just in front of the screen, with his white hands partially inserted in the pockets of his lovely grey trousers, puffing volumes of smoke from his excellent cigar, and smiling radiantly as his lustrous eyes rested upon the assemblage of his pupils, who were all bending over their foolscap most busily at work.

The two tomatoes, which had been lying on the table in front of the man with the black hair and the brown whiskers and moustaches, had disappeared.

'Capital!' said Arliss. 'Let me introduce you to Mr. Singleton and Mr. Harry Cleave'—the tall young man and the sandy youth nodded politely—'and Mr. Paul Chalmers.'

Felix turned towards the man who was writing furiously, but received no recognition.

'He's too inspired to notice you,' said Arliss. 'Now if you were a tomato——'

At this moment the click of an opening door was audible. Mr. Singleton and Mr. Harry Cleave grasped their pens, and Arliss moved swiftly towards the wooden screen, reaching it exactly as Mr. Carringbridge emerged, exquisitely dressed in a delicate brown frock-coat and trousers, a pale pearl-coloured waistcoat, and the most elaborate brown-satin cravat Felix had ever seen. He was, as usual, puffing at an excellent Havana, and carried in one white hand some sheets of much-blotted and corrected manuscript.

'I was just coming to tell you that Mr. Wilding wished to see you, sir,' said Arliss.

A radiant smile illuminated Mr. Carringbridge's handsome face.

'I am delighted to see h-im,' he said, extending his hand and pressing Felix's tenderly. 'One moment. Mr. Chalmers—Mr. Chalmers!'

He slightly raised his voice, but still kept it very sweet.

Mr. Chalmers looked up from his writing in a manner that was half dazed, half frenzied. Mr. Carringbridge beamed at him and handed him the blotted manuscript.

'It is very clever, Mr. Chalmers,' he said, with pearly distinctness, 'very clever and subtle indeed, but it is not sufficiently actual. When I said 'Write upon the morals of Babylon' I did not mean the Babylon of Semiramis but the Babylon of John Bull. The latter is of immediate, the former merely of archaic interest. We must not be archaic h-ere.'

He gazed upon his pupils, as if to impress this important fact smilingly upon them, then he added:

'But it is very clever, Mr. Chalmers. It shows great diligence. We will talk it over thoroughly after lunch. Now, Mr. Wilding, if you please.'

And while Mr. Chalmers stared at him with dazed and violent eyes he turned gently round to escort Felix to the inner chamber. When they reached it he said:

'A very persevering man Mr. Chalmers. He was a piano-tuner.'

'What!' said Felix, with difficulty repressing an inclination to laugh.

'A piano-tuner, but was left what he names, I think, "a little windfall" by an Australian aunt, and now proposes to take to literature. Well, I shall not prevent him. His industry is an example to us all. Sit down, my dear Mr. Wilding.'

Felix sat down and at once drew out his mother's cheque and laid it upon Mr. Carringbridge's table.

'I—I came to bring you that,' he said, reddening slightly, and feeling embarrassed, as he always did when he had anything to do with money matters.

Mr. Carringbridge took up the cheque and examined it with the most serene complacency.

'You have made your decision. Ah! May I ask whose signature this is?'

'My mother's,' said Felix.

'You have your mother still! A merciful thing for you.'

He spoke rather abstractedly, while he folded up the cheque and put it into a crocodile-skin case edged with silver which he drew from an inner pocket. Then, with a sudden but always suave decision, he said:

'We will complete the agreement at once. Will you kindly read this while I call Mr. Arliss.'

He handed to Felix a document printed on stiff parchment-like paper, and, getting up, moved quietly to the door. Felix glanced hastily over the document, which set forth that Mr. Samuel Carringbridge having duly received from—here there was a blank for a name—the sum of one hundred and five pounds bound himself for the space of one year from—a blank for a date—to teach and instruct the said—to the best of his, Mr. Carringbridge's, ability, in all the elements of journalism. What these elements were was then set forth. At the bottom of the whole rigmarole was a place for the signature of Mr. Carringbridge and a witness. Mr. Carringbridge, returning followed by Arliss, promptly signed his name in a bold, clear, flowing hand. Arliss signed his below. The blanks in the document were filled up, and in about a couple of minutes it was tenderly handed to Felix by Mr. Carringbridge, with a happy smile and the purred remark:

'You are now a member of my school.'

'Thank you very much,' said Felix.

Arliss had returned to the outer room and Felix stood by the table, wondering what he was expected to do. He looked at Sam—he was Sam to Felix now, henceforth and for evermore—and Sam looked at him.

'Can I do anything more for you, Mr. Wilding?' he said.

'You know you have only to command me. I come up here every day from Brighton simply and solely to place myself at the disposal of my pupils.'

'Well, I—would you mind just explaining to me a little what sort of thing I had better begin with?' said Felix, wondering how much initiative he ought to display in these, as it seemed to him, very peculiar circumstances.

'You wish me to put you *au courant*? Sit down, my dear Mr. Wilding. Sit down and let us have a chat together.'

He closed the door with an air of comfortable satisfaction, and sank down in his chair as if he had at length reached a moment of life for which he had long been earnestly hoping. Blowing forth a cloud of cigar smoke, from which his beautiful eyes and rose-coloured, smooth cheeks presently emerged as the sun emerges from behind a mist most softly beaming, he began to speak in a clear voice, with a delicate and yet animated precision.

'The journalism of to-day, when it is worth tuppence-halfpenny—sometimes, I regret to say, it is not worth that sum—is either a brilliant revelation to the public of the actual, or an ingenious appeal to the imagination of the masses. In order to be a successful journalist, Mr. Wilding, you must either be an observant person or an accomplished liar. I advise you to make up your mind as soon as possible which you mean to be. I was both, and for some years made two thousand per annum. But the effort to be both is too great for many people, and, therefore, I usually advise my pupils to make a choice. Mr. Chalmers has chosen to be an observant person, and I am at present engaged in endeavouring—I hope with moderate success—to train him to see what comes within the range of his vision. He goes to the Law Courts, to Madame Tussaud's, to the Park, to the pit of Drury Lane, to Piccadilly Circus, and records, or tries to record, what he sees in these great centres of legal, Sunday-school, fashionable, popular, and vicious life. The clever journalist must know how to play upon the fears of his country. Try to learn how to frighten people, and your editors will cherish you. The alarmist earns a big salary nowadays. I know a man who has made many hundreds of pounds by writing about the downfall of England. The downfall of England is his speciality; but I do not recommend my pupils to specialise while they are with me. At the beginning of your career learn to range freely over life. Study every kind of life. Go into the palace, if you can gain admittance—it is your business to gain admittance into impossible places—go into the butcher's shop. Wherever you

are, whatever you are doing, be on the watch. If you are being thrashed—which Heaven forbid!—study your sensations. What is pain? What is humiliation? What is cowardice? If you are being embraced, I advise a precisely similar mental attitude. What is affection? Why does the meeting of lips give pleasure? What is pleasure? Analyse—analyse every one and every thing that comes within your purview. Analyse the girl you are making love to. Analyse yourself. Analyse me. Try to be pictorial and vivid in your writing. Choose striking forms of expression. Never be tame. In journalism it is not a crime to be vulgar. Far from it. But to be tame is a crime. Nobody ever earned a good income in journalism by being tame. The journalist must know how to be sensational. If he does not, he will only earn a comparatively small sum. Modern papers live greatly by their sensationalism. And by sensationalism I do not merely mean blazing accounts of murder, arson, rape, and robbery. Many religious papers exist by being sensational about ritualism, bishops, the supposed spread of atheism, and the machinations—also very often supposed—of the Jesuits. Others thrive on the manufacture of political sensations. Others exploit literature and so forth. There are many fish in the sensationalist's net. I could be sensational upon any subject, as you will see if you care to glance at my articles. Foment the public passions, then lull them to rest. If you read the most successful newspapers you will find that they are continually engaged in these two processes. Why? Because the public likes it. It is agreeable to the public to be first righteously angry and then righteously good-tempered. The first causes it to feel virile, the second saintly. Be an opportunist. The journalist need have no convictions, but he must seem to be made of nothing else. You need never be sincere, but you should always write as if you were. The art of journalism is like the art of acting. It is the art of successful simulation. Its tears are such as flow at the behest of a vegetable which I need not mention. Such tears make, as a rule, quite as much effect on the public as those caused by genuine sorrow. The public likes humbug. Every editor who is worth his salt is aware of this great fact. Give the public what it likes; humbug, Mr. Wilding, humbug, *toujours* humbug. But be very careful to choose the humbug that is popular at the moment. Sometimes it is the humbug of jingoism. Sometimes it is the humbug of commercialism. Sometimes it is religious humbug. Sometimes it is the humbug of England's mission of spreading light in the world. Sometimes it is the humbug of

were waitresses, in black gowns and smart white caps and aprons. They were not shy, and seemed to be on most familiar terms with Mr. Carringbridge's pupils. A table in a corner had been kept for Arliss, and by it, in an attitude of saucy self-consciousness, stood a short, plump, fair-haired girl with round, blue eyes, chubby lips, and a large, fluffy fringe. She was their waitress, and was formally presented to Felix as the 'Babe.' This young lady showed great complaisance. She made Felix take a seat in a corner facing the room, inquired after his health, wished him success in the journalistic career, and promised to do anything that lay in her power to assist him in the study of women. Felix was most grateful, more especially when Singleton informed him that the 'Babe's' intellectual powers were remarkable, and that she always helped him with his articles.

'Do you write many?' said Felix.

'One every month,' returned Singleton solemnly, putting up his eyeglass to examine his mutton cutlet with mushroom sauce. 'Slow and sure's my motto, and Sam knows it.'

The discussion of Sam was most animated. Felix did not know what he thought of him. Was Sam a serious cynic, a genial wit? Did he really care whether his pupils got on, or was he merely a good-natured humbug intent on spending the evening of his days in the maximum of comfort procured by the minimum of effort?

Mr. Singleton, who seemed to be of a somewhat melancholy temperament, shook his head gently in answer to Felix's questions, and murmured something vague about the mysteries in the heart of man.

'Oh, cheer up, do, Mr. Singleton,' said the 'Babe.' 'Sam's done a lot for you, I'm sure. Why, but for him you might never have seen me. And there's a loss for you.'

Cleave considered Sam to be 'as clever as he could stick.'

'Yes,' said Felix. 'But does he teach one much?'

'That depends on one,' replied Cleave.

'Exactly,' said Arliss. 'If you bother Sam you can get a lot out of him.'

'Then I shall bother him,' said Felix.

Mr. Harry Cleave looked at him very seriously over a glass of lager beer.

'If a second Paul Chalmers is added to the school I feel convinced that our little Samuel will succumb,' he said, in an anxious voice.

'Why?' asked Felix. 'Does Chalmers bother Sam much?'

'Much!' cried Arliss. 'Never leaves him alone for a minute. Chalmers shows up an article a day as regularly as clockwork. But it's Sam's own fault. He oughtn't to have taken Chalmers.'

'Why?'

'Because Chalmers is an idiot. Poor chap! He's awful, of course, but I declare I pity him, sweating away like that and all for nothing. He'll never get on. Why, he's forty already and can't get near a grammatical sentence.'

'And he won't have the "Babe's" help,' added Singleton, with mournful regret. 'I offered it to him, and he told me he didn't consider it would be honest of him to accept the assistance of a woman; as if woman wasn't brought into the world expressly to be of assistance to man.'

At this point the 'Babe' intervened and, in the liveliest cockney manner, began to combat Singleton's conception of the intentions of Providence in creating Eve. Mr. Harry Cleave and Arliss joined in, and the lunch concluded in a perfect hubbub of slangy merriment and obvious repartee, of which latter the 'Babe' proved herself to be an accomplished mistress.

When Felix reached his flat that afternoon he was in splendid spirits. The light-hearted gaiety of youth which prevailed in Sam's school was infectious. Mr. Paul Chalmers was the only member of the little community who did not succumb to it. But then he had been a piano-tuner for more than fifteen years. Felix had not, and was a happy victim to the epidemic. He liked Sam. He liked Arliss, Cleave, Singleton—everybody. He had already asked the 'Babe' to tea, and she had most demurely promised to come on a Saturday, if she might bring another girl as a chaperon. And this coming into contact with other young lives seemed to Felix to have set him on his feet in London. Henceforth he was at home. He had something to do, somewhere to go each day. He was part of an intimate and lively community, not an intellectual one, perhaps, but that did not matter. The sprite which has its throne in the heart of youth governed him just then, and gaiety of mind seemed more to be desired than even romance with all its tender troubles.

He sat down at his writing-table and began an article on the 'Blessings of Humbug.'

greediness for life, for something striking, great, romantic, even bitter, something that would make him feel, 'I have seen the hidden goddess. I have touched hands with the Fates. I have heard a voice from the centre of things, from the darkness and the heart of the world.' Was he any nearer to the centre, to the heart of things here and now than when he sat with the tailor by the fire, or looked out with him upon the coming of the spring? He was just beginning to learn that man is a pursuer from the cradle till he sinks into the grave.

It happened that on Saturday night, when he was going to dine with the Ismeys, he was in a fiercely animated mood. This mood had been brought on by work. He had spent the afternoon shut up in his flat alone, striving for the first time to write an imaginative story. While he dressed for dinner his brain hummed, so he felt, with thoughts. They had surely voices and murmured. One called to him, and another. Each was anxious to claim his attention, to seem worthy, to find favour in his eyes. The fighting thoughts in the brain are terrible egoists. And each one longs to live. When he went down into the air he found the night was cold. As he drove towards Green Street this coldness of the atmosphere rendered him more acutely aware of the heat and the fire within himself, of the strange and mysterious ardour of his own personal life. The processions of thoughts in his mind, the processions of feelings in his heart, bewildered him. He looked at the hurrying figures of the streets, half seen in the waxing and waning lamplight, and the strange, and almost terrible idea struck him that enclosed in each one of those innumerable, flitting shapes were such processions, infinitely multiplied. There was a sort of beginning of madness in the mental contemplation of one such human fact. People, people, people—and in each person a crowd. A crowd of thoughts moving towards action; a crowd of loves and hates and resistances and acquiescences. Terrible, frightening vitality of the world.

The cab stopped. He saw a strip of carpet, an open door, footmen, lights. It was time to cast away this mood. He sprang out.

When he reached the drawing-room he found Mr. Ismey there with three people: Mr. King Marshall, a small elderly lady with white hair and very neat, aristocratic features, and a pale, youngish man, with a bald head and light-brown moustaches turned up at the ends. Mrs. Ismey was not in the room. Felix wondered if she were ill. Mr. Ismey, who looked, Felix thought, worried and careworn, greeted him kindly and pre-

sented him to Lady Enfield, and to the pale man with the bald head, whose name Felix did not catch.

'Mr. King Marshall and you have met already, I think,' he said.

'Yes,' said the novelist, in his thin, melancholy voice.

He shook hands gently with Felix, and began to speak to him about autumn effects in great cities. His mind was evidently full at the moment of this subject. When he paused for an instant Felix heard Mr. Ismey apologising for his wife's absence to the other two guests.

'I don't think she has been feeling very well to-day,' he said. 'She was lying down and got up a little late to dress.'

Lady Enfield expressed the hope that she was fit to come down to dinner.

'Oh yes. Her maid tells me that she is all right now. It was only a severe headache, I believe.'

The pale man began to speak about neuralgia with a very strong, but pretty, foreign accent. Felix, in a low voice, inquired his name of Mr. King Marshall.

'That is Antonino Marza, the Sicilian poet,' he answered.

Felix looked at the pale man with sudden, deep interest. Although still young—perhaps thirty-eight or thirty-nine—he had already a cosmopolitan fame, and his works were read in translations in most European countries and in America. His face was plain, but his eyes were intensely animated, and he spoke with great rapidity. Lady Enfield was evidently much interested in him. She kept her light-blue eyes fixed upon him all the time he was speaking, and her face, which was like a cameo, kept changing delicately in obedience to his changing words.

The door opened and two ladies came in, one behind the other. The first was a small, very handsome, blonde woman, who looked like a Milanese; the second was a typical British beauty of the lean, fair, well-bred species, with wavy, thick, brown hair, parted in the middle and growing low on the forehead, a radiant complexion, and clear, brown eyes, full of purity and courage. Felix took a great fancy to her on the spot. There was something about her that suggested clear, running water in sunshine, mountain breezes over heather and the light-blue skies of spring. Mr. Ismey, after he had greeted these guests, began to look preoccupied. He called the butler to him, and said a few words in a low voice.

'I don't know, sir,' answered the man.

'Go and see,' said Mr. Ismey. 'Say that——'

evidently only think of colours in relation to clothes. Mr. Ismey, who kept perpetually stealing strange glances at his wife, gave Lady Enfield his attention to set Marza free, and the poet, looking at Miss Hartfield, plunged again into the topic of the value of black. After a minute or two he exclaimed:

'I cannot say what I want in English. It is dreadful.'

'I understand French,' said Miss Hartfield.

'And you,' suddenly exclaimed Marza, looking at Felix, 'do you understand French?'

Felix reddened with surprise and pleasure. He felt himself to be such a nonentity that it delighted him to find that this great man cared whether he was one of his comprehending audience or not.

'Yes,' he said with diffidence, 'I do.'

'*Bien!*' cried Marza.

He continued his harangue in French. King Marshall began to fidget and to crumble his bread into tiny pellets. Every one was listening to Marza except Lady Enfield and Mr. Ismey, who still spoke about black gowns. Now and then Miss Hartfield broke in, also speaking French. Once she said:

'You go too far, Signor Marza. You revel in what is horrible. You are morbid.'

'Ah,' he said vehemently, 'that is the eternal accusation which is launched against me. To be able to penetrate deep into the diseases to which human nature is liable is not to be morbid.'

As if instinctively he turned towards Mrs. Ismey when he said this. Her face suddenly twitched as if she had St. Vitus's dance, and an expression that was like an expression of fear came into her eyes.

'To be clairvoyant is not to be morbid,' he continued, still looking at her.

'Do you claim to be clairvoyant?' she asked.

'Yes,' replied the poet boldly. 'Especially when I am with women.'

'And yet women like you!' she said. 'Isn't that strange?'

'No,' said Mrs. Creshet. 'We love what we fear.'

Mr. Ismey stopped talking to Lady Enfield. The turn the conversation was taking seemed to arrest his attention.

'Only that?' he said in French.

There was something startling in his intonation. Everybody felt it, except apparently King Marshall, who was still crumbling his bread into pellets.

'Only that?' repeated Mr. Ismey.

'Do you ask your wife or me?' said Mrs. Creshet, with a faint malice.

'You, Mrs. Creshet,' he answered quickly.

'Well, I doubt if any woman could truly love a man whom she felt that she could never fear under any circumstances,' she said.

'But perfect love casteth out fear,' said Miss Hartfield, in her quiet voice, which seemed always to have the sun on it.

'So the Bible says!' Marza exclaimed, with obvious bitter sarcasm.

Lady Enfield looked rather shocked and rather confused too. Marza turned to King Marshall.

'What do you say, my dear master?' he asked, still speaking French.

King Marshall looked up from his bread-crumbs like a man startled.

Well?' said Marza with insistence.

'Truth,' answered the novelist vaguely in English. 'Truth—we must seek only that, only and always that.'

He gazed down again at his bread-crumbs.

'But, my dear Mr. Marshall,' said Mrs. Creshet in English, 'we are coming to you to ask you what is the truth on this subject. You were listening, weren't you?'

She spoke rather impertinently and challengingly.

'Certainly, certainly,' he replied.

'And you grasped our meaning, of course?'

Felix wondered what she meant. King Marshall looked her full in the eyes.

'Naturally,' he said, after a moment of marked hesitation. 'But the truth is difficult to come at in a moment.'

He turned to Mrs. Ismey, and began speaking to her rather hurriedly about some political topic of the moment. All the rest of the evening Felix noticed that he seemed constrained and ill at ease.

Felix was deeply interested in Marza. The Italian was evidently a pagan and rejoiced in it. There was in his conversation a curious mixture of brutality and delicacy which fascinated Felix. His intellect was obviously as subtle as his nature was animal. When the ladies had gone into the drawing-room he spoke with more unabashed freedom on various subjects not usually discussed at dinner-parties. He spoke in English, at the special request of Mr. Ismey, who declared that his French had become shaky, and that he was only at ease in his own language. Mr. King Marshall said very little, and Felix

was an enchanted listener. He remembered saying to the tailor in the forest that he would go to London, and that he would get to know the people who were doing things, who were influencing the minds and the hearts of the world. Now he sat with two famous men and heard them talk. He could hardly believe his own good fortune. Eagerly he drank in everything Marza said. The poet made him feel as if life were a flower given to a child to pluck to pieces. When the last petal had been examined, and the heart of the flower stood on the stem utterly unprotected by leaves, then it was time for the child to die. How many petals had he plucked? Not one, he thought. He was stirred by a longing to rush out into the night, to grasp the flower, to tear off the first petal. Marza roused in him the destructive passion. He did not notice King Marshall looking at him intently with his fiery, brown eyes. Marza often addressed his remarks to Felix. He seemed to enjoy the obvious, enthusiastic interest of the boy.

It was rather late when they went up into the drawing-room. They found Mrs. Creshet looking frightfully bored on a sofa beside Lady Enfield, who was busily talking about bonnets.

'But, my dear Lady Enfield, what are bonnets?' Felix heard Mrs. Creshet say, as he came into the room. 'Have I ever seen one? Do explain. Of course I know a hat. But what's a bonnet?'

Lady Enfield, who always wore bonnets despite the tyranny of fashion, looked like one suddenly confronted by an idiot.

Mrs. Ismey, who was talking to Miss Hartfield, presently called Felix to her with a glance. He sat down beside her. King Marshall joined Miss Hartfield. Mrs. Ismey still looked tired and unusually plain. White did not suit her, Felix thought.

'Is this your first dinner-party in London?' said she.

'Yes,' he answered.

'Have you enjoyed yourself?'

'Enormously,' he exclaimed with enthusiasm. 'I have never enjoyed anything so much before.'

'You find Signor Marza interesting?'

'Intensely. But who would not? How wonderfully clever he is.'

'He is too clever,' she said, lowering her voice.

'Oh, but how can any one be that?'

'Lots of people are, believe me. Take care you never become so.'

'I!' said Felix, with genuine humbleness. 'There's no chance of that.'

'I don't know.'

She looked at him with her weary eyes. Felix suddenly felt compassionate.

'Are you really feeling better?' he almost whispered.

'Oh yes.'

She moved, as if shaken by some intolerable sensation.

'This room is very hot,' she said.

She began feverishly to pull off one of the long, white gloves which she had kept on the whole evening. Felix watched her doing it with eagerness. Everything that a woman of the world did interested him as nothing else interested him. Her arm was beautiful as it slipped into view. Its warmer whiteness was made more lovely by the whiteness of her dress. He longed for the moment when he would see her hand. Slowly she pulled the long glove lower till her wrist was bare. Felix's eyes began to shine. He bent a little forward. Then, abruptly, he turned away and looked at the other people in the room. He felt quite sick, almost as if he had seen a crime committed.

He longed to say, 'For God's sake put on your glove again.'

Her hand was horribly dirty, more filthy, he thought, than the hand of any poor working woman that he had ever seen.

'What is it?' she asked.

He turned to her again, but kept his eyes away from her hand. He hesitated. He wanted to tell her that she did not know—that she had, by accident, forgotten to—no, it was impossible; he dared not. He felt that he would never be forgiven.

'Nothing,' he answered.

She looked quite calm. Evidently she had no idea what was the matter.

At this moment Lady Enfield got up to go. Felix was thankful. There was a general movement. He said good-bye.

'Come to see me to-morrow afternoon,' Mrs. Ismey said, touching his hand with that dreadful hand. 'That is if you wish to conform to the strictest etiquette.'

'I will,' he said.

He was glad to take his hand away, and yet she charmed him always. He only felt that she had made a dreadful mistake of which she was as unconscious as a child, and he longed to tell her of it and to protect her from any one knowing it but him. When he saw her shaking hands with her other guests he almost shivered with anxiety.

Marza bade him good-bye cordially.

'I am at the Carlton Hotel,' he said. 'Come in one afternoon to see me. I am in London for a month to arrange about producing a play here next summer.'

Felix thanked him and promised enthusiastically to call. As Felix was leaving the house King Marshall joined him.

'Shall we walk a little way together?' he said.

'May I walk with you?' said Felix, almost intoxicated by his good fortune, and wondering why such men cared to have anything to do with him. 'Oh, thank you.'

They set out towards Park Lane. The night was starless and rather cold. King Marshall said nothing, and Felix did not venture to start any conversation. So they walked down Park Lane till they were near to the corner of Piccadilly. Here the novelist stopped.

'We shall have to part in a moment,' he said. 'I am going to the Devonshire Club, and I believe you live in Victoria Street.'

'Yes,' said Felix.

'Well, I wish to say something to you.'

He paused. Felix wondered very much what was coming.

'Do you remember what I said to you at Ismey's office about truth?'

'Yes. I shall never forget it.'

'To-night at dinner I was led to tell a falsehood.'

'A falsehood!' repeated Felix in amazement.

'Yes. I do not speak French, or understand it when it is spoken. I was, therefore, unable to know what was being said at dinner. When Mrs. Creshet appealed to me I said I did know what had been said. I was ashamed to acknowledge the truth before a brother-author much more accomplished than myself.'

He stopped. Felix said nothing. He had a lump in his throat and could not speak. After an instant King Marshall added:

'I was the son of a very poor man of humble origin, and was therefore denied the education of a gentleman. In consequence of this I do not know a great many things that the people I now meet do know. I believe I heard Mr. Marza asking you to visit him?'

'Yes,' said Felix.

'I wish, when you go, you would kindly explain to him what I have just told you. You will be doing me a great favour. Will you do it?'

'But——' Felix murmured.

His cheeks were hot.

'Please do,' said King Marshall. 'And say I asked you to.'

Felix looked at him.

'Yes, I will,' he said.

'Thank you, my boy. Good night.'

The novelist shook his hand and walked slowly away. Felix looked after him. He wore a cloak. His small figure, from which the cloak swung as he moved, soon disappeared in the darkness.

Felix made a movement to follow him. But then he refrained. He was a boy and did not want to 'make a fool of himself.'

CHAPTER XVII

NEXT day, for the second time, Felix was alone in a room with Mrs. Ismey. He went to see her expectantly, though why that mood possessed him he scarcely knew. She was in the drawing-room sitting at the piano. Several wax candles were burning, and a fire was lighted on the hearth. Near it stood a tea-table. As he came in Felix noticed that there were only two cups on the pretty white-and-green cloth. The low sound of the piano filled the room and seemed to add to its beauty.

Mrs. Ismey did not get up when she saw him, but went on playing, and said to him, through the music she made:

'I am so glad you regarded strict etiquette.'

Felix came up to the piano and stood by it looking at her, but not where he could see her hands. He was afraid to see them after last night, and yet he longed to. She was playing without notes. He did not know the composition, which was whimsical and sad, barbarous too, he thought. He guessed that it was written by a Russian.

'How much do you care for music?' she asked, just loud enough to be heard above the sound of the piano.

'Intensely,' he said. 'It makes me feel so many things.'

'What things?'

'As if I could do what I can't do.'

'And what is that?'

'I never know. Music makes me feel, but it doesn't make me know.'

She stopped speaking. He was glad. He wanted to watch her and to listen. She looked quite childish at the big piano, he thought, and much prettier than she had looked on the previous night. But she did not look well. There was something haggard and nervous in her face, and even in her attitude. Was she, he wondered, trying to be herself the David to her own Saul? Her hazel eyes shone in the candle-light under her thick eyebrows, and were almost as yellow as a cat's. They had a strained expression. They looked like sentinel eyes on guard

in the dark. To-day the way she played was not like Felix's conception of her. It was, he fancied, more like Lady Caroline's playing. Perhaps it only seemed to be so because Lady Caroline was not there to overshadow her. The music was very interesting, and continually increased in interest as it drew towards an end. The wandering fragments of melody were drawn towards the main stream. That which had been a little difficult to understand became plain. Felix began to lose himself in the happiness of hearing when, abruptly, Mrs. Ismey stopped on a chord which had no finality, but which demanded another chord to follow it. She got up from the piano and went towards the fire.

'Oh, why do you do that?' asked Felix, feeling physically hurt. 'But it's horrible to stop like that in the middle.'

'It's tea-time,' she replied, touching the bell. 'Come and sit down.'

He came away from the piano slowly. He was almost angry with her.

'It's horrible of you to do that,' he could not help saying.

She looked at him, and sat down by the tea-table.

'Why, what a sensitive boy you are,' she said. 'I believe you're in a rage with me. Yes, you are in a rage.'

He forced a laugh.

'No, indeed, I'm not. But why did you stop?'

'Because I was tired of going on. That's one of my faults. I can't finish things. I'm a miserable, inconsequent woman.'

'Are you miserable?' he said, as if he meant it.

Just then the butler came in with tea. Mrs. Ismey made no reply till he had gone. Then she said:

'You must not ask me questions.'

Felix had sat down opposite to her. He loved being thus alone with her.

'I won't do anything you dislike,' he said.

She began to pour out tea.

'Perhaps you couldn't,' she answered.

'I wish I knew when you mean what you say and when you don't,' he said. 'But I scarcely ever do.'

She gave him his cup and took her own. She sipped her tea and stretched out her hand to the sugar-basin. For the first time he glanced at her hand, and at once a happy look came into his face.

'Now, why do you suddenly look so pleased?' she asked.

Felix reddened.

'You don't want me to know the reason,' she added.

'No, I don't,' he said boldly.

'Was it something about me?'

'Well—yes.'

'I wonder what. I can't guess.'

'It is almost the only thought I have ever had with you that you haven't guessed, I believe.'

'Then I understand you better than you understand me?'

'Of course you do. Sometimes I think that I scarcely understand any one except my own people.'

She smiled.

'Stephen—you count him as one of them now, I suppose?'

'Oh, Stephen!' exclaimed Felix. 'I understood all about him after I had been with him for five minutes. But he is cut on a pattern, isn't he?'

'I dare say. But perhaps I am too. Quantities of women are.'

'I am sure you are not. Nor is——'

He hesitated.

'Well, go on,' she said, almost curiously.

'I was going to say Lady Caroline.'

Mrs. Ismey drank her tea slowly and put down her cup.

'Carrie interests you,' she said, in her most drawling voice. 'She interests you very much.'

'Yes, I think she does.'

'More than I do?'

'Oh no.'

'As much?'

'You both interest me more than any two people I ever met before,' he said, half evasively.

'Don't class me with Carrie,' Mrs. Ismey said quickly, and with some bitterness. 'We are quite, quite different.'

'Of course I know you are,' he exclaimed.

'And yet you think of us together. Yes, I know you do. I felt it the other night. That's not clever of you; not at all clever.'

'But isn't Lady Caroline your greatest friend?' Felix said.

Again he was conscious of hostility in Mrs. Ismey.

'My greatest friend!' she said. 'Carrie!'

She poured herself out some more tea. The action, perhaps, gave her time to think, for when she went on speaking her manner was more guarded.

'I suppose she is,' she said. 'Certainly I know her more intimately than I know any other woman. So if great knowledge is great friendship—well!' She shrugged her shoulders. 'It is a question with some people, I believe, whether any woman can have a great friend in any other woman. I wonder what

Signor Marza would say on that subject. He has studied it, of course, as he has studied all subjects connected with us. Hateful man!'

Felix was startled by the vehemence of the last words.

'Do you mean that?' he asked.

'Yes, I do,' said Mrs. Ismey, this time with unmistakable feeling. 'A man who can allow his intellect to govern his heart, even to hold the reins of his animal passions as Marza does, is hateful. His intellect is never, never at rest. Even his intrigues are only so many lessons in the lore of women. And the women not only give them but pay for them too. Ironical, isn't it?'

'You mean he is always studying human nature?' asked Felix.

She could not have introduced a subject which interested him more. He forgot to drink his tea as he listened to her and looked at her face, which was very expressive in the quiet light of the wax candles and of the fire, a still red fire in which no restless flames danced.

'Yes.'

'But does that make a man hateful?'

'To a woman, do you mean?'

'Well, yes. I think I meant essentially hateful really, but let's say to a woman.'

'Yes, it does, because it makes him cold and makes him cruel. Many women have loved Marza, but scarcely one who has not learnt to hate him in the end.'

'And yet,' Felix said, 'I should have thought that studying human nature like that might make a man more tender instead of more cruel. Mightn't it? Suppose he found out beauties in a character which he had never suspected before?'

'What do you think of this tea?' said Mrs. Ismey. 'It is a mixture of Ceylon and China tea. Do you think it's good?'

Felix grew hot. He felt as if she had slapped his face. She spoke with butterfly inconsequence, brushing away the topic in which his mind had been plunged as a housemaid brushes away a cobweb from a dark corner. He made no reply. Her eyes were wandering all over the room, like a child's when it is bored by a lesson, and searches aimlessly for some distraction, a fly on the window-pane, or a sun-ray on the white ceiling.

'My husband has gone down to Windsor,' she continued.

'Has he?' Felix replied with difficulty.

'Yes, to see a novelist about some book he's bringing out. Well, what have you been doing to-day? Have you been to church?'

She looked at him now. She was evidently quite unconscious of the vexation she had caused by her inconsequence.

'Yes; I went this morning.'

'Where did you go?'

It was so obvious to Felix that she didn't care, and was merely speaking for the sake of speaking, that he answered:

'I don't think it matters much, does it?'

Directly he had said the words he thought, perhaps, he had been unpardonably rude. But he felt on wires. All his nerves were tingling.

'Did you say St. Paul's, Knightsbridge?' she replied.

Again her eyes were wandering about the room. Felix put down his cup and got up quickly. The movement attracted her attention.

'Why, what are you doing?'

'I—I ought to be going,' he said stiffly.

All the young blood in him felt congealed by her careless inattention.

'I am boring you,' he added. 'And I don't wish to bore you any longer.'

'My dear boy!' she said. 'What utter nonsense! Why, what's the matter?'

She got up quickly too, and stood quite close to him, looking up into his face.

'What have I done?' she said, putting her hand on his arm lightly.

'Nothing. But I am boring you,' he persisted. 'Let me go.'

He felt that he was behaving like a boy instead of like a man. He could have struck himself for his boyishness, and yet he could not behave in any other way.

'But I won't,' she said. 'Why, I am keeping out all callers this afternoon simply to have a good talk alone with you.'

'Not really?'

'But I am. Do you suppose no one comes to call on a Sunday afternoon?' She moved lightly and swiftly to the bell and touched it, then held up her hand. 'Now just wait and you shall see.'

They waited in silence. Felix looked at her as she stood by the bell, with her arm stretched out in a soft attitude of expectation. The butler came.

'Has any one called, Henry?' she asked him.

'Yes, ma'am——'

'Just bring up any cards that there are—since we have been having tea.'

The man went out and returned in a moment, carrying several cards on a salver. Mrs. Ismey took them.

'You can go.'

The man left the room and shut the door. Then she came up to Felix.

'There,' she said, giving him the cards, 'there are the proofs of my desire to have a quiet talk with you.'

Felix looked at the cards. One bore the name of Antonino Marza.

'Aren't you satisfied?' she said.

She spoke really as if she cared what he felt. And what he felt was that he would like to kiss her hand, which was so beautiful to-day.

'But how can you want to be with me?' he murmured. 'I'm a boy—I know I'm a young ass and I must bore you. You're accustomed always to being with such brilliant men, all these writers and poets and critics.'

'And could I trust one of them to drive me where you drove me the other night?' she said. 'Marza uses his intellect too much with a woman, but you use yours too little. Now——'

She looked at him and at the chair he had been sitting on. All his anger was gone. He was in a sort of turmoil of confusion and happiness. When he had sat down he said:

'I can't think why you're so good to me.'

'I have smothered you with benefits, haven't I?' she answered.

She looked at him as she spoke and, when she had spoken, screwed up her eyes. As Felix grew to know her better he found that this was a trick of hers. When she did it she looked like some sort of queer, fascinating animal that was sharp as a needle, full of lightness, humour, and coquetry—perhaps a squirrel. The very deliberation of this trick increased its fascination for Felix. Now that she had persuaded him to stay she did not seem to have anything particular to say to him. He could not help noticing that this afternoon her mind was a vagrant. She was unable or unwilling to pursue any subject for more than two or three minutes. Directly he began to be interested in it she tired of it. In any other person this inconsequence would have irritated him. He could not have borne it in his mother, for instance, or in Margot. But Mrs. Ismey actually charmed him by this very inconsequence now that he was prepared for it. He thought of it as part of her elusive nature which he could not understand. And then it was combined with intelligence, not with stupidity. She did not fly

away from any question because she was puzzled by it, or knew nothing about it. At least Felix thought not. Often, indeed, she left a topic only after she had slain it with a word, or held it up to a dry light of ridicule which exposed, to his eyes, its meagre little skeleton. Her quickness of mind delighted him. He was not wholly disinclined just then to believe that swiftness was depth.

When the clock struck six he got up to go.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'I ought to go. I have been here two hours.'

'Have you? Wait a moment. Just ring the bell twice, with a little pause between.'

Felix did so, wondering.

'I am going to lend you a book of Marza's,' she said, 'translated into French. It will show you that I am right in saying he is a hateful man.'

At this moment the door opened and a maid appeared. Felix hardly knew why, but he looked at her closely and with interest. She was a tall girl, apparently about twenty-four, with a round pale face, black hair, and small, dark eyes. She was plainly dressed in black, without a cap or apron. Her expression was oddly emotional for a maid's, and she had very pretty, small hands. Felix saw her look at him swiftly and curiously, and instantly look away.

'Alice,' said Mrs. Ismey, 'I wish you would go to my bedroom and see if you can find a green-and-white covered book. It is one of Antonino Marza's, and is called *Cenere*. I believe it is on the table by my bed.'

'The one I put the food on at night, ma'am, or the other?' said the maid.

A perverse look came into Mrs. Ismey's face.

'The other, the other!' she said hastily.

Alice went out.

'But I thought you said it was in French?' Felix said.

'So it is, but I have had it rebound, and kept the original Italian title. I like it better than *Les Cendres*.'

They waited for Alice to come back. She was rather a long time.

'She can't find it, I suppose,' said Mrs. Ismey.

'Is she nice?' Felix asked. He felt interested in the maid, though he had no idea why.

'Alice?'

'Yes.'

'She's a clever lady's-maid, and very devoted to me, but she's got faults. If one trusts her completely, and makes

her feel it, she will do anything for one; but if one tries to keep anything from her she can be perfectly horrid. Her motto must be "All in all or not at all." Hush!'

Alice came back carrying the book.

'What an age you've been!' said Mrs. Ismey.

'I couldn't find it, ma'am.'

'Why, surely it was on the table.'

'No, ma'am.'

'Where was it, then?'

Alice looked at her mistress in silence.

'Oh, never mind,' said Mrs. Ismey, 'as long as you've found it. That will do.'

She took the volume and the maid went out.

'Read that,' Mrs. Ismey said. 'And learn from it how not to treat a woman.'

She gave Felix the book. It had an exquisite binding of white and green, tooled with gold, and with a gold pattern of palm leaves, but on one side of it there was a large red stain.

'Oh, look! what a pity!' Felix exclaimed.

Beauty wounded always hurt him.

'It's red ink,' he added, after examining the cover.

'Well, it can't be helped.'

Mrs. Ismey spoke with complete indifference. As Felix took her hand to bid her good-bye, she said:

'By the way, what are you doing with yourself in London?'

Felix told her about joining Sam's school. Although they had spent two hours together he had forgotten to mention it before. She had made him think of her and forget himself.

'Mr. Carringbridge!' she said. 'Oh, I have met him.'

'Do you like him?'

'He's very intelligent,' she answered. 'So you're with him.'

She stood near the door at which he was going out looking at him thoughtfully, almost suspiciously.

'What is it?' he asked, with keen interest.

'Oh, I was only thinking that there are a great many influences at work on you now besides the Balzac influence,' she answered. 'There's Mr. Carringbridge's, King Marshall's'—Felix had told her of his interview with the novelist in Mr. Ismey's office, but not of the novelist's subsequent confession—'my husband's perhaps, Carrie's——'

'And yours,' he said. 'Yours.'

She touched the book he was holding carefully.

'And now Marza's. I wonder if I am wrong to give you that book. Never mind.'

Felix had thought of going again to church that evening. The habit of church-going clung to him still, and, besides, he loved church music when it was good. But now he was eager, having met Marza, to read *Cenere*. Directly he got home he began it. He read till late in the night and finished it. While he was reading it, still more when he had finished it, he understood Mrs. Ismey's denunciation of the novelist. It was the history of an intrigue between a man and a woman of talent, an intrigue apparently begun by both under the influence of real passion. But the man was an incurable egoist. He considered everything in life strictly in relation to himself. He appreciated everything simply as it affected him. His worship of self was a monomania. He justified it in everlasting tirades, immensely subtle, immensely brilliant, and immensely abominable. The woman acquiesced for a long time in this self-worship of her lover, but at last she could bear it no longer. She, who had for so long sacrificed herself, at last woke to the consciousness of what was due by her to herself. She turned upon the man, poured out her soul in a speech of impassioned invective, and left him, so she said, for ever. At the close of the book, after striving in vain to endure a solitary life, she crawled back, like a dog, to the feet of the man, begged his forgiveness, and entreated to be permitted to enter his life once more, since she could not exist without him. But the man declared that he had learnt that it was possible to live without her, to live for and in art, in art which cannot reproach, which cannot make scenes, which can satisfy, uplift, soothe, and permanently inspire passion. He had learnt that he could only be unselfish for that one mistress's sake, and that only in such unselfishness was he really happy. He refused to receive the woman back. She threw herself into the Tiber. In the final pages the hero, in a most exalted cerebral condition, was engaged in planning a monument to her memory, which, in its exquisite beauty, was to surpass all the monuments of the past. In impassioned language he described it to the sculptor who was to carry out his ideas as his tribute to the only woman who had ever loved utterly since the beginning of time. But it was impossible not to realise that he really thought of it as a lasting memorial, not of his grief, or of his adoration of the creature who had died for him, but simply of his superior taste and culture. When he was dust men would point to it and murmur his name, while the woman to whom it was nominally raised would be forgotten. And why not? She had only known how to love another, while he, the man, had known how to love himself.

Felix was startled, was almost dazed by the continual brilliance of the book. The intimate knowledge of an almost endless variety of subjects shown by the author astounded him. The poetical beauty of the descriptions, the heat and eloquence of the love-scenes, fascinated him and stirred him. But the egoism of the hero disgusted him, and it seemed to him that it was the egoism not only of the hero but of the hero's creator. This pitiless selfishness was, he felt certain, the pitiless selfishness of Marza himself. And all his young sympathies were with the wretched woman and against the man for whom she died.

Yet as he undressed to get into bed his intellect fell on its knees before Marza. It was only his heart that rejected him.

After he had put out the electric light, he lay awake for some time. In these last two days he had begun really to feel something of that which he had expected to feel in the centre and the heart of the world. The torch was being set to that fire which had been laid within him by invisible forces, by forces which, despite his bringing-up in a religion, he felt that he could not guess at. His intellect was waking up. Would his heart slumber on? He did not ask himself the question. But he was conscious of the various influences which Mrs. Ismey had spoken of, and knew himself to be sensitively responsive to all influences.

The boy, who had been so imitative of the physical peculiarities of others, was now set face to face with a far more subtle temptation than that of reproducing any bodily grace or affliction. Would he be able to resist playing the monkey to the minds of others? Would he be strong enough to keep his soul a free thing?

that he hoped she would invite his sister and brother-in-law, he condemned in his heart his sister's incomprehensible love of change. He never thought of his own.

On the Thursday afternoon of that week, after leaving the school, he called at the Carlton Hotel and asked if Signor Marza were at home. He felt very diffident, even nervous in doing this, although the poet had told him to come. Perhaps he would not have called had it not been for his walk with King Marshall and the latter's confession. He was conscious of a sort of latent fear of Marza since he had read his book, *Cenere.* He was afraid of his genius as he had never been afraid of the genius of Balzac. For Balzac presented human beings working out their fates. Marza presented surely himself, working out his own egoism, while the lamps of poetry, learning, passion, pathos, burned to light him at his task.

Felix's card was taken up while he waited in the vestibule. Many people came in and out, left cards, took the keys of their rooms, spoke to the men who stood behind the counters looking composed and indifferent. The women who came were all very smart. They walked carefully as if almost afraid of their elaborate costumes. Felix recognised one as a well-known young actress. She wore an immense hat which was covered with black feathers. They protruded over the brim, curling inwards as if trying to touch her painted and powdered cheeks. As she entered the vestibule she glanced quickly round with her bright, artificial eyes to see if she were being noticed. One of her hands was bare, and covered with rings. The pink nails of the fingers were so highly polished that they glistened. She took a key from the attendant and rustled out. As she passed Felix she glanced at him with a sort of sly defiance. He was wrapped in a cloud of perfume. He looked after her feeling half fascinated, half sickened.

In two or three minutes the man to whom he had given his card returned, and asked him to come up to Signor Marza's room. They mounted in a noiseless lift, went down a long corridor with a thick carpet, past brown doors with gilt numbers and many piles of huge trunks, turned a corner, and came to a door on which the attendant knocked. After a moment he opened it, and showed Felix into a sitting-room which was full of roses. They stood in jars on a writing-table near a fire, on another table covered with books and newspapers of different countries, on the high mantelpiece, on two cabinets which were loaded with china and signed photographs and bits of old silver. Felix thought he had never seen so many roses in a

small room before. A large cage was placed on a stand near the drawn window-curtains. The door of it was open, and the cage itself was empty. When he had come quite into the room, Felix saw that two canaries were flying about in it. One fluttered over his head, alighted on the pole from which the curtains hung, and observed him with its round, bright eyes. It turned its little narrow head about swiftly on its supple neck, as if in a paroxysm of observation. There was a door in the wall on the left hand opening into a second room, and Marza came in from this room almost immediately.

He had on a black silk smoking-jacket unbuttoned, and held a very long and large cigarette in his hand. The attendant was just going out as he entered, and as he shook hands with Felix he glanced hastily round the room.

'Are both the birds here?' he said to Felix in French.

'Yes,' said Felix.

'Where is Caterina?' asked Marza. 'I can only see Peppino.'

'There,' said Felix, pointing to the little vagrant on the curtain-rod, who was still turning her head this way and that with a ceaseless swiftness.

Marza looked relieved. He smiled. Directly he smiled he was charming. Like many Sicilians he smiled with his eyes. The lower part of his face scarcely altered, but southern sunshine came out in his eyes, and little lines of gaiety and kindness appeared on his cheeks beneath them.

'I am so afraid of their escaping,' he said. 'Do sit down.'

'I hope I am not disturbing you,' Felix said, sitting down in a chair near the fire.

'Not at all. Peppe! Peppe!'

He held out his hand to Peppino and chirruped. When he did that he looked like a boy, almost like a child. The little bird would not come to him. He tried to persuade Peppe, throwing himself into the task with an *abandon* that fascinated Felix. He whistled shrilly, bending forward and holding out his arm like a branch for the bird to alight on. A wooing expression came into his face. It was obvious that his whole heart was summoning the bird. At length, after chirping once or twice as if in reply to him, and fluttering his pale-yellow wings anxiously, Peppe flew to him and perched on his shoulder near his neck. At once Caterina, as if seized with jealousy, flew down also from her curtain-rod, and alighted on his outstretched arm close to his wrist. He glided towards the cage, looking at Felix sideways with a cautious smile that hardly dared to be a smile

that part of the sunny hillside which is far away from the goat-herd's piping, the goat that is tired of the sound of the tarantella, and so has its front and hind legs tied together with a frayed cord. You are tired of the tarantella. Of course you are. But you let the old generation hobble you with the frayed cord. It is such a pity!'

When Marza said 'It is such a pity!' an expression that seemed to be an expression of real grief came into his face, and he stretched out his left hand towards Felix with an appealing gesture. Felix sat looking at him in silence. His last words had made a deep impression: 'You are tired of the tarantella.' Felix did not know Sicily. The whole simile, the little picture so swiftly painted in words, was definitely Sicilian. And yet how perfectly it suggested to Felix his own experience at Churston Waters on the evening of his return from France. The tarantella had been piped to him then, the tarantella of the English country village where he was born. The old generation had piped it to him and he was tired of it. He wanted something new, something different. He longed to wander further up the mountain-side. As he sat thinking this, and still haunted by the sound of the poet's words, which floated in his imagination like music in the air, his face must have been expressive of his thought, for Marza said:

'You have wished to wander. You wish to wander still.'

'Yes,' said Felix.

He began suddenly to feel that at last he was with some one who really understood him. Marza, by his words, but still more by something indefinable in his personality, called to the gates of the boy's soul all the romance that lay hidden in the dark places behind them. His power of doing this was the cause of his power over women. He was not at all handsome, but those who were with him invariably forgot to think about that. They had no time to notice the glass since the flame that burnt behind it was so vivid.

'Well, do what you wish. Get away from the tarantella. Don't think it your duty to stay listening to it for ever. The cord is frayed. Break it. I never hesitated to do so. That is why the old generation hates and fears me. Take note of this. If you hear me discussed in the world where people read and think you will always hear the old people, the generation that has said its say, and done its work, and made its impression, denouncing me. When I have a moment of dismay—all artists have such moments—when for an instant I doubt whether I have any value, whether I have any power to bring forth what

is fresh, whether I have any progressive faculty, that is, I listen to the denunciations of the old generation and I take courage. The measure of the old generation's hatred of me is the measure also of my value for the new.'

He suddenly lifted both his hands to his lips and, with his pointed fingers, violently twisted up the ends of his moustache. The gesture was pugnacious. Felix felt tremendously excited. To sit alone with a man of Marza's fame, and to hear such intimate talk as this, was for him a most glorious experience. The obvious audacity of the poet's mind enthralled him. Marza's freedom seemed for the moment to be his own freedom. The sound of the door into the corridor opening gave him a painful sensation. It was followed by a rustling noise. Felix turned round, saw a lady coming into the room, and sprang up.

The visitor, who had evidently let herself in with a key which she was holding in her gloved hand, was very young, apparently a girl of about seventeen, and extremely beautiful. Felix thought that she too must be a Sicilian like Marza. She had an oval face, lit up by immense dark eyes, in which light seemed swimming, a childish, rather helpless, but lovely mouth, and thick, wavy, dark hair. Her figure had all the thin, flat grace of scarcely budding youth, that grace which makes old and experienced goodness feel full of tenderness and fear. When Felix saw her fully he felt sure at once that she had been born a woman of the people, although she was beautifully dressed in a sable coat, with an exquisitely impudent little black hat, under the curled-up brim of which was tucked a vivid scarlet flower against her hair. Marza did not seem at all surprised by her entrance.

'Ah, Nunziata,' he said, coming from the fire to take a small parcel which she was carrying from the girl's hand. 'What is this? Another jewel? You should not buy jewels without me. You know your taste is—well, uncertain.'

He smiled at the girl with a sort of half-contemptuous, and yet affectionate indulgence, put up his hand and gently touched her soft, round chin. She made a little *moue* at him.

'Let me introduce Mr. Wilding to you,' said Marza.

He still spoke French.

The girl looked at Felix and nodded, prettily but carelessly.

'It is hot in here,' she said to Marza in bad French. 'I must go and take off my things. Excuse me, please!' she added to Felix, with a smile which lit up all her face.

Her manner was fascinating, and yet there was something common, something faintly coarse in it which startled Felix.

CHAPTER XIX

WHILE Felix packed his bag on Saturday morning he felt as if years had passed since he had seen his people and Churston Waters. He threw in his things quickly. He did everything more quickly in London than in the country, though he was not aware of it. As he pressed down his clothes he thought of Marza and of the girl who had called 'Nino.' He had been thinking of them a great deal since Thursday. Marza was to him half a hero, half a villain. Whether the heroic or the villainous half attracted him most he could not tell. He wondered what Mrs. Ismey would think if she knew about the rustling in that inner room. Would she be shocked? He longed to find out, but he knew very well that he could not speak to her about such a subject without being again overwhelmed by the feeling of guilt which had overtaken him in the corridor of the hotel. There was confusion not only in his brain but in his heart, and a great longing for—there he stopped. He did not know what he longed for. But since Thursday he had been painfully restless and uneasy. It was impossible for him to settle to anything. He had done scarcely any work at Sam's. Arliss and the rest had been able to welcome him to their idle conclave. He had made more noise, had chattered more than any one. Yet all the time he had been thinking what babies they were. Only to Paul Chalmers had he said anything about Marza. When Chalmers heard the poet's name he looked up from his writing with a start. He and Felix were, for the moment, alone in the writing-hall. The other pupils had not come back from lunch.

'Marza!' Chalmers said, mispronouncing the poet's name; 'd' you say you 've met him, Mr. Wilding?'

Chalmers always prefixed Felix's name with Mister, although Felix had begged him not to.

'Yes. Have you read anything of his?'

'Ay,' Chalmers replied.

He seldom said yes. He helped himself to a large chocolate cream out of a pink cardboard box and began to munch it,

staring at Felix very hard with his large eyes, which were both fierce and sad.

'Ay,' repeated Chalmers. 'You see, Mr. Wilding, one must keep abreast of the—the—of the——'

He hesitated, and began to look angry and confused.

'What's the word I mean?' he said, as if to himself.

'The times?' suggested Felix.

'No, no—the—of modern thought, you know.'

'Oh, the trend.'

'Ay, that's it. Well abreast of the trend of modern thought. I always read of a night. I've been through Ibsen, I've been through Tolstoy, and now I'm going through this one in the translation. It don't do to get behind the trend of modern thought, Mr. Wilding, not if you want to make a name, that is.'

Felix looked at the big, dreary, anxious face, at the paper protectors over the wristbands of the rusty frock-coat, and suddenly felt as if he could howl.

'No, no,' he said, 'of course not.'

He turned away, took out some manuscript and began to look over it. He wished he had not mentioned Marza to Chalmers. The latter went on staring at him for two or three minutes, then seized his pen again and began to write violently, murmuring over the words half aloud as he put them down in a large, copperplate hand, with many deep black curls and dashes.

Chalmers and Marza! Two ambitions! Now Felix put his black silk socks into a corner of the bag, looked round to see whether everything else was in, locked the bag, strapped it, stretched himself and went to the window. There was a clock in the court. It was just one. His train started at two-thirty and he meant to lunch at the station. There was plenty of time. But he felt in a hurry, and decided to have a cab called and to start at once. He walked into the sitting-room, went to the tube by which he communicated with the servants in the basement, and was just putting his lips to it when there was a knock at the door.

'Come in!' he said, looking round.

The porter appeared.

'There's a lady to see you, sir.'

'A lady!' said Felix, surprised. 'Is it my mother?'

He felt suddenly as if it must be.

'No, sir, a youngish lady,' said the porter. 'She's waiting downstairs to know if you're in. She wouldn't give no name.'

Felix wondered who it could be.

'I'm just going to the station,' he said.

'Yes, sir. I told the lady I thought you was.'

'Never mind. Ask her to come up.'

'Yes, sir.'

The man went away and Felix stood where he was, still wondering very much who the 'youngish lady' could be. He thought of Marza's companion. But it was impossible that she would call on him. Mrs. Ismey? No, he felt quite positive it was not she. He heard the rustle of a dress.

'The lady, sir,' said the porter's voice.

Mrs. Ismey walked in quickly. Directly the door was shut she held out her hand and said:

'Did you guess who the nuisance was?'

'No,' said Felix. 'I'm awfully glad to see you.'

'What a little duck of a room, all green and idols, just what I love.'

She walked round it, touched the ornaments, looked into the mirror, then at Mrs. Wilding's photograph, which stood in the middle of the mantelpiece.

'Your mother!' she said. 'What a good one. It's a dear face.'

She took it up, then immediately put it down again.

'I don't know why, but good people always photograph better than wicked ones,' she said. 'I suppose wickedness is more elusive than virtue.'

Her voice sounded flippant. Her whole manner was fidgety, and made Felix feel what he called jumpy. She was dressed in a pale-blue cloth gown trimmed with fur, and wore a white veil. As she stood by the mantelpiece for a moment, with her back turned to him, Felix noticed that the veil was very badly tied, as if it had been put on in a great hurry. One end hung down and moved with the movement of her head. At one side of the veil, too, there was a rent. Felix longed to tell her of these two facts. He began to feel as if her appearance were of great importance, and hated anything in it which might be censured by an unfriendly critic. He was very glad that Marza was not there to notice the veil.

'What's the matter?' she suddenly said, turning round.

'Nothing,' he exclaimed with uneasy emphasis. 'Do please sit down.'

'No, no. I want you to take me out to lunch. Will you?'

'I shall be delighted, but—I say, will you mind very much lunching at Charing Cross?'

'Charing Cross!' she said. 'My dear boy!'

She looked whimsically surprised.

'No, no. It doesn't matter. Of course you wouldn't care to. It was only that I have to catch a train at half-past two. I'm going down to my mother's.'

'Well, but there's plenty of time. We can go to Prince's and you can easily manage it. Send on your luggage and tell the man to bring the ticket to Prince's.'

'Yes, of course. I'll get my hat.'

Suddenly he stopped as he was near the door.

'What is it?' she asked very sweetly, with that sort of definite sweetness which often covers feminine irritation.

'These clothes. I can't go with you in country clothes.'

'Nonsense. They suit you. Get your hat. The carriage is waiting.'

Felix hurried into his bedroom, feeling half delighted, half uncomfortable. He loved the way she took possession of him, simply loved it. She seemed to look upon him as her property. That suggested an intimacy which set him in a glow. And yet he was a little uncomfortable. That train—his mother would probably drive to Frankton Wells in the carriage to meet him. He did not wish to lose the train. But, as Mrs. Ismey said, there was plenty of time if they went at once. He caught up his hat and gloves, whistled for the porter, gave directions about taking the bag to the station and bringing the ticket to the restaurant, and then hurried back to the sitting-room. Mrs. Ismey was looking into the court, holding back the little, dull, green blind which was stretched across the lower half of the window with one hand.

'Ah!' she said. 'Good boy! Don't be afraid, you shall catch your train. I know how disappointed your mother will be if you don't.'

'Well, you see, she might drive to the station to meet me and——'

'I know. I like you for thinking of her. Come along.'

Felix wondered why, as he followed her out of the flat, he felt like a muff. Certainly she could not have wished to make him feel so, and yet he fancied that he detected a touch of lively malice in her voice. When they were in the carriage, which was a brougham, she began to chatter. She hardly let him say a word while they were driving through the streets, but talked on a number of subjects which had no connection with each other, dropping each one almost as soon as she had taken it up. There was no drawl in her voice. She spoke with unusual quickness, but also with unusual emptiness, as if every subject were equally devoid of interest to her, and she were only speak-

ing because she disliked silence, not because she really wished to say anything. Perhaps for this reason her talk made Felix feel unusually stupid. As they were going into Prince's he again noticed the rent in her veil and the loose end. They quite spoilt the otherwise charming effect of her costume, and he fancied that the loungers in the vestibule, even that the attendants, noticed them and thought as he did about them. He explained to the porter that a man was coming presently with a luggage-ticket for him, left his name, and they walked into the restaurant. It was not yet very full. They got a table against the wall, halfway down the room. Mrs. Ismey sat down, took off her veil, and glanced round with a sort of swift, searching nervousness. Her eyes looked faded and smaller than usual. If eyes could be shrivelled up, like old tired bodies, Felix thought that would be the best description of their appearance to-day. Having glanced round, she saw him watching her, and screwed up her eyes at him deliberately, with that sort of odd, almost animal roguishness which he had noticed in her two or three times before.

'I like you best in country clothes,' she said irrelevantly.

She began to crumble her bread although she had not yet taken off her gloves. Felix felt as if he could not talk. He had nothing to say, perhaps because he felt that she was not in a mood to attend closely to anything, or play the listener's part. She took up the *menu*.

'Are you hungry?'

'I don't believe I am very,' Felix said.

She was again looking about the room, and he, thoroughly stirred to restlessness by her restlessness, did the same.

'Why, there's Lady Caroline!' he said.

'Where?' said Mrs. Ismey hastily.

'A long way down the room, at the end behind you, with somebody.'

'A man or a woman? Where is she? I don't see her.'

She turned round on her chair to look behind her.

'A woman with grey hair.'

'I see. Mrs. Bertold. They don't see us. Don't you think Carrie looks horribly ill?'

She was still turning round.

'I don't think she ever looks very well,' Felix said.

Almost as he spoke he thought he was saying a stupid thing.

The waiter handed them *hors d'œuvre*. Mrs. Ismey helped herself to a sardine.

'Oh, then you've noticed what a curious colour she generally is?' she said.

She was quickly unbuttoning her gloves while she spoke.

'Carrie—well, Carrie smokes too much,' she continued.

She looked at Felix, as if to note what effect this statement would make upon him. It occurred to him that she was treating him like a baby, to whom you say airily that the moon is made of green cheese. Yet Lady Caroline did smoke, and too much smoking is bad for the complexion.

'I would rather die than have a complexion like that,' she added.

She laid her gloves beside her plate and picked up a little fork. Felix looked at her hands and became hot. He longed to cover them up, to beg her to put on her gloves again. She had evidently no idea what was the matter, and ate her sardine quickly.

'But you don't think I ever could, do you?' she asked.

With an effort Felix answered:

'Is there anything peculiar in Lady Caroline's complexion?'

He began to eat too, keeping his eyes averted from her hands.

'Why yes, everybody notices it.'

She helped herself to some sole. Felix stole an anxious glance at the waiter. The man's face was imperturbable. He came round to Felix and bent down with the dish. As soon as he had gone Mrs. Ismey continued:

'And talks about it. Numbers of people have asked me why she is that strange colour. Of course I always say I don't know.'

She had broken up her sole into small fragments. Now she pushed them about her plate and laid the fork down.

'I think for a friend one ought to say what one can, don't you?' she said.

She leaned back in her chair and looked at Felix with those curiously faded eyes.

'I don't quite understand,' he said.

He was thinking so much about her hands that his attention was not fully grasped by what she was saying.

'Of course not. Why should you?'

She was silent for a moment. Then she said:

'And yet I'm sure Carrie wouldn't care if you did. She really doesn't care what any one thinks of her.'

'But why should she? What I do, I mean.

'Well, I don't know. I should care much more what you thought about me than what most people do.'

'But you——'

'I know,' she interrupted. 'I told you it was for myself, that I was unwell. I did that to screen Carrie.'

It occurred to Felix that it was rather strange, if this were so, that Mrs. Ismey should be so open at this moment.

'You're wondering why I should say anything now,' she said.

He realised how dangerous her swiftness of apprehension was, while it attracted him almost more than anything else in her.

'Yes, I was,' he answered simply.

As their intimacy grew he was becoming much more frank with her. And he thought that she, too, was becoming very frank with him.

'I almost wonder too,' she said. 'But somehow—well, since that night I have felt that a woman might rely on you, although you are such a boy.'

At that moment Felix felt as if he actually loved her.

'Thank you,' he said, with a sort of eager earnestness that was very young.

'And it's rather bad having to act for another woman without being able to say a word to any one, especially when you feel that whatever you do you are doing no good at all, that you are of no use. I can't tell my husband. He hates Carrie and she hates him.'

She poured some more wine into her glass. The waiter had darted forward to do it, but she took no notice of him.

'That makes it so difficult for me,' she continued. 'My husband and my greatest friend. You can understand.'

'Yes,' Felix said.

He was filled with sympathy for her.

'I was travelling in France with Carrie when I first met my husband. People are so odd. I really believe sometimes that jealousy is the guiding spirit of the world.'

'Oh, but that would be horrible!' exclaimed Felix.

'Does that make you think it must be impossible? You forget your Balzac.'

Felix blushed. She screwed up her eyes, looking at him with a sort of gay kindness.

'But I've noticed that London has begun to blot out the *Comédie Humaine*,' she said. 'Now, hasn't it?'

'Perhaps it has,' he acknowledged.

'When one acts in a play one forgets the play one has merely read.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

The continuous buzz of conversation in the restaurant, the movement of the many waiters, the sight of numbers of people whose faces were strange to him, these things bred excitement in Felix, who was utterly unaccustomed to restaurant life. His mind felt very keen but not concentrated. Everything struck him as looking and sounding rather unnatural. The expressions in the women's eyes were surely artificial. Even the food he was eating tasted deliciously odd, and the murmur of the many voices was both frivolous and mysterious in his ears. No wonder that this city, with its innumerable hands, wiped out the writing on the slate.

'This ice is delicious,' Mrs. Ismey said.

'I can't think how you live,' he answered. 'You never seem to eat anything solid.'

'Women don't need so much as men—in that line.'

'Don't they? I shall never understand women, except just two.'

'And who are those lucky ones?'

'Why, my mother and sister.'

'Oh; but suppose I try to make you understand Carrie better,' she said, returning to their former subject.

'Wouldn't she mind?' he asked.

His curiosity was fully roused, but he felt a great delicacy in being let into Lady Caroline's secret by another woman. That was, perhaps, hardly right, hardly chivalrous.

'Suppose even that she did! Would that matter much if it was a way of helping her?'

'I would do anything in the world!' Felix said, with sudden, warm enthusiasm.

The idea that he could help two such women as Lady Caroline and Mrs. Ismey thrilled him. They knew everything he did not know. The doors still shut to him had, no doubt, long been open to them. Yet, he was a man, and men were surely meant to help women. Perhaps even in his ignorance he was stronger, more capable than they were, without knowing how or why. Mrs. Ismey, perhaps, could tell him how and why. If so, he would surely be a fool to try to stop her. He resolved quickly to leave himself quite in her hands.

'Tell me just what you like,' he said. 'Ask me anything you like.'

'I don't feel as if I could go on being alone in this thing any longer,' she said. 'And since the night when you drove me to Wigmore Street I have felt as if I would rather tell you than any one. Some men would have been so horrid. They

would have asked questions, or thought something dreadful of me. It was such a strange thing to do. Any one might have imagined—but you didn't. I went to that chemist to beg him not to sell Carrie any more morphia.'

'Morphia!' said Felix.

'Hush! Be careful! Somebody might hear us. Yes. She is ruining her life with it, and that night—well, you remember when you were waiting at the hall door and she and I were talking?'

'Yes.'

'You must have noticed how earnestly we were speaking. I had my hand on her shoulder.'

'I did notice.'

'It was something that happened then which made me feel as if I couldn't wait, as if I must try to do something that very night. I couldn't make up my mind. You see I didn't know you so very well then. All the time we were driving I was trying to decide what to do. At last I resolved to go to that horrid man.'

'The chemist?'

'Yes.'

'It was awfully good of you,' said Felix. 'It was splendid of you.'

He remembered the dark, blind house, and how she had stood on the pavement alone ringing the chemist's bell, the stealthy opening of the door, the half-seen figure, her disappearance into the murky gloom, the interval which seemed so long before she came back.

'I couldn't have slept if I hadn't done it,' she said.

'Will you take coffee, sir?' said a voice with a strong foreign accent.

Felix started.

'I—will you have coffee?' he asked Mrs. Ismey.

'Yes, Turkish coffee, please.'

Just as Felix was ordering it he thought of the time. He looked at the clock. The hand pointed to the half-hour.

'Oh!' he exclaimed involuntarily.

'What's the matter?'

'Only—nothing really—but I've lost the train.'

'Oh, I am so sorry,' Mrs. Ismey said.

She spoke with the sweetest earnestness.

'It's all my fault. But you've been so kind that I've been selfish. I really forgot.'

'Please, please don't. It doesn't matter, if I can send a telegram to my mother.'

'Get a telegraph-form quickly,' she said to the waiter.

While he fetched it she went on saying how vexed she was. Felix begged her not to mind. The man brought the form, and Felix wrote a hasty wire saying he would come down by the next train.

'Does it matter so very much?' Mrs. Ismey said. 'I feel quite guilty, spoiling all your plans with my miserable little affairs. I'm afraid a woman can be very selfish—when she comes across a man who isn't.'

She looked at him gently.

'Please, it's quite all right,' he said.

He was too deeply interested in what she was saying to care if he missed a dozen trains now. The waiter brought the coffee.

'Light your cigarette,' she said. 'You'll forgive me more easily when you're smoking.'

She drew out a little gold matchbox that hung on a thin chain with some pretty, absurd charms at her side, lit a match, and handed it to him. As he took it eagerly he thought of Marza and of the rustling in that inner room, and he felt as if he understood Marza much better to-day than he had before, and even as if he were more like him. She began to sip her coffee.

'Does—does Mr. Ismey dislike Lady Caroline because he knows?' Felix asked in a low voice.

He looked across the long room as he spoke and caught a glimpse of Lady Caroline, who was leaning one arm on her table, and talking with apparent earnestness to her companion, a very smartly dressed, middle-aged woman, whose hair was grey in front and dark at the sides.

'Oh no. He never liked Carrie from the first.'

'But hasn't he an idea?' said Felix.

He was thinking of his interview with Mr. Ismey in the office, and of Mr. Ismey's curiously bitter, almost violent expression when Lady Caroline's name was mentioned.

'I don't think so. Why? Do you think he has?'

A piercing look suddenly darted into her eyes, and she glanced at him with the most narrow, eager scrutiny.

'No, I don't know at all. How could I?'

'Of course not.'

She began to sip her coffee again.

'It's terrible for me,' she said, after a moment. 'Seeing the gradual *dégringolade* of my best friend. It's a perfect nightmare.'

'It must be horrible,' said Felix.

He looked again towards Lady Caroline, examining her with

the most profound interest. A cloud of tragedy seemed floating round her, in the midst of which his imagination was flying like a bird. He could not see her expression very well. She was too far off. But even from that distance she looked notable. There was a boldness in her attitude, in a gesture which she made while she was speaking, which marked her out from the crowd of women drinking coffee and chattering with the men, who were smoking cigarettes.

'And she looks so strong,' he could not help saying.

'Strong—Carrie?'

'Yes. But no one who was strong could be a victim to a thing like morphia, could they?'

'Why not? In a way Carrie is strong. She will do what she chooses, and nothing in heaven or earth can stop her.'

'But how did you think I could possibly be of any use, then?' Felix asked, wondering.

'I don't know. Drowning people catch at straws.'

'But you're not drowning.'

She laughed quickly.

'I! No. I talk nonsense. But Carrie's got on my nerves. You must have noticed how nervous I am to-day.'

Again the sudden, narrow look of scrutiny came into her eyes.

'Haven't you?'

'I thought you didn't seem quite the same as usual,' Felix answered. 'But then, perhaps, it's ridiculous to say "as usual" about you.'

'Why ridiculous?'

'Well, because you are changing all the time, aren't you?'

As he was actually answering her question memories of the many differing women he had seemed to see in her came to him: the gay, sarcastic woman with bright and observant eyes; the languid woman in the garden at Churston Waters, moved to such strange emotion by a dull duet; the woman by the tramp table; the woman who stole furtively into the chemist's house; the woman whose face twitched as she listened to the harangue of Marza.

'A woman like my mother never seems to change,' he added. 'But you are never quite the same as you were yesterday. I can't make it out.'

She laughed lightly.

'Shall I try to be?'

'No, don't,' he answered hastily. 'I do wish I could help you now, though.'

'So do I,' she said.

This time there was an unmistakable thrill of earnestness, almost of passion, in her voice. It was a voice that meant more than it said.

'But I suppose——' he began.

'Hush!' she whispered. 'Ah, Carrie, we spied you in the distance!'

Felix started. He had not seen the approach of Lady Caroline. He jumped up, feeling as if she must know what Mrs. Ismey and he had been talking about.

'The food's quite good here to-day,' Lady Caroline said.

She stood in the midst of the crowd, looking rather as if she were made of stone. Felix glanced at her furtively. Now that he knew so much about her he thought her peculiar complexion more dreadful than ever. That pinkiness in it was vicious. Fatigue seemed brooding over her to-day, and yet she looked strong, as if she could do things, as if she had a constitution able to defy excesses which other women would sink under.

Mrs. Ismey greeted the woman with the black-and-grey hair, and Lady Caroline, turning to Felix, said:

'Let me introduce you to Mrs. Bertold. Mr. Wilding—Mrs. Bertold.'

Mrs. Bertold, who had a wandering, society eye, and an aimless but well-meaning manner, bowed.

'London's quite fillin' up,' she remarked, in a voice empty of all significance. 'There's Lady Stuckfield. Who's she with?'

'I don't know,' Felix answered, feeling hopelessly ignorant, and thinking about Lady Caroline, with a kind of mingled horror and attraction.

'It looks like Sir George Bray. No, it isn't. The moustache is too white. Not Harry Wilmer, is it?'

She held a glass to her pale eyes. Lady Caroline and Mrs. Ismey were exchanging some words in low voices. Felix only heard one. It was 'Paris.'

'Yes, it is Harry Wilmer,' continued Mrs Bertold, with a sort of cotton-wool animation. 'Good figure, hasn't he?'

'Yes, very,' said Felix, trying to make out which of the innumerable men in the room she was talking about.

'A pity his wife's such a horrid woman, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Her ridiculous passion for ermine's simply ruinin' him. Of course one can understand it. But still—even ermine isn't everythin', is it?'

'No, indeed.'

'There's Milly Emphage. What a hat! She *will* go to Rosa Croix for hats. Such an insanity!'

At this moment Lady Caroline interposed.

'We must be off,' she said. 'We are going to a concert. Good-bye.'

She stared Felix full in the face with her light eyes.

'I shall be in on Tuesday afternoon at five,' she said. 'You like me, don't you?'

'Lady Caroline!'

'Never mind whether you do or not. Come in on Tuesday.'

'Do you like her?' said Mrs. Ismey, as soon as they had gone.

'I think I do in a way. I don't quite know what it is, but—she's so blunt, isn't she? And in her it is attractive.'

'Is it? Well, I suppose we ought to be going too. I'll drive you to Charing Cross.'

'Oh no, you mustn't. Let me take a cab.'

'Indeed I shan't. Besides, I've got something to ask you on the way.'

'What is it you want to ask me?' Felix said, when they were once more in the brougham.

'Something very unromantic.'

She put on the white veil.

'Something that may surprise you very much. Don't mind refusing me.'

'Of course I won't refuse. Is it—is it anything to help Lady Caroline?'

'You mustn't ask any questions. Could you possibly, just for a week till next Saturday, lend me a hundred pounds?'

Felix was so surprised by such a request from her that he felt almost as if he must have heard wrongly. It was impossible that she could be in a money difficulty. Ismey and Co. was such a great firm, and so notoriously rich.

'A hundred pounds?' he repeated, in quite a dull, interrogative voice.

'Never mind. If it's the least awkward——'

'No, no, I didn't mean that! Of course not!'

But even while he was speaking he realised that he would have to ask his mother for the money.

'I only want it for a week, and I don't wish to ask my husband for it. I had no idea till—well, till very lately that I should need it, or, of course, I could have taken it out of my pin-money.'

Felix felt certain that she wanted the money for Lady

Caroline, and that Lady Caroline must have spoken about the matter in the restaurant. Yet that was very strange too, for surely Lady Caroline was an absolutely independent woman with a large fortune.

'I 'll be only too delighted to lend you the money,' he said, trying to speak naturally, but feeling very uncomfortable for her, since he realised acutely how uncomfortable she must be feeling. 'It's only—I shall have to ask my—I shall have to get it from my mother.'

'Oh, that's impossible,' Mrs. Ismey said.

She spoke rather sharply. After an instant she added gently:

'I mean if you have to tell her that it's for—well, for me.'

The way in which she said this made Felix absolutely positive that the money was for Lady Caroline, and that Mrs. Ismey, for her friend's sake, was putting herself into this very painful and false position. An ardent admiration for her, an ardent desire to serve her filled him.

'I 'll get it without saying a word,' he exclaimed. 'I 'll just say I want it. That will be true. I do want it for you.'

'Thank you.'

She touched his hand with hers. He looked at the glove on it, felt half inclined to withdraw his hand, then that he was a brute for the feeling. She left her hand on his for quite a minute while they drove on, and at the end of the minute his pulses were beating, and he had quite forgotten that brief instant of repulsion. He ventured to press her hand very gently with his, and, while he did so, he thought of the girl rustling about Marza's inner room and opening and shutting drawers. There was emotion in his eyes. Just for that moment he felt as if he were a man with great powers, as if he were a brute too; and then, immediately, as if he were an anxious boy again.

She took away her hand lightly.

'Will you be quite perfect, and send me a wire directly you know whether you can arrange matters with your mother?' she said.

'Yes, yes, I will.'

'To-night, do you think?'

'Yes, I'll ask her to-night. Almost directly—when I'm twenty-one it'll be all right. I shall be quite my own master about things of that sort.'

They were just turning into the station-yard of Charing Cross.

'Don't think badly of me for this,' she said. 'Will you?'

'Badly!' he exclaimed. 'Do you suppose I can't guess why——'

'Hush!' she interrupted. 'You aren't to guess anything.'

The last thing she said, as he stood on the station pavement among the jostling porters, was:

'And if it's all right could you let me have it by Monday?'

'I'll send it by post to-morrow,' he replied. 'Don't be very angry with me, but I do understand why you want the money, I do really.'

She only smiled faintly.

He knew that she was determined to guard the secret of her friend.

CHAPTER XX

IT was a quarter to five, and quite dark, when the train in which Felix travelled ran into Frankton Wells station. When he came into the station-yard and looked about he could not see the carriage. No doubt it had met the train he had missed. He hoped his mother had not come in it. He engaged a fly and started, in rather a depressed mood, upon his lonely drive of over three miles. The lights of the country town—how countrified it looked to him after the London streets—were soon left behind, and the grey horse jogged slowly along the roads between the hedges and the flowerless banks. Felix had had the fly opened and, as he drove, he looked out gloomily enough at the yellowish-white road, the tall trees, the empty fields. The excitement he had left behind him made the quiet of this country, wrapped up in the autumn evening, seem so profound as to be almost unnatural. Even its familiarity did not render it companionable. He shivered and wished himself back in London. Now that the heat of his afternoon mood had passed he dreaded having to ask his mother for that cheque for a hundred pounds directly he arrived. She would have been disappointed by his not appearing in time for tea. It would seem ungracious to speak on money matters so soon, especially as he had just received the cheque for a hundred guineas to pay Mr. Carringbridge. The arrangement between them till he came of age was that Mrs. Wilding defrayed all the expenses of the flat, and that Felix had an allowance of seven pounds a week paid weekly. When it had been settled that he should live in London, she had been ready to make over to him his whole fortune. But in his enthusiasm at the liberty he was gaining, and his gratitude for her self-sacrifice, he had preferred to have an allowance. The seven pounds a week had seemed riches to him then. Mrs. Ismey's sudden request made him think that he had been very short-sighted. However, it could not be helped. He would have to speak about the cheque directly he saw his mother, so

that he might be able to fulfil his promise to wire to Mrs. Ismey that night.

The fly-horse went very slowly. It was half-past five when at length the lights of Churston Waters began to shine through the darkness, and the fly turned into the long, straight road which led by the schools to Hill House. As it rolled past the high yellow wall of the yard Felix heard the loud barking of Mab and the jangle of her chain. He glanced up at the windows of the new part of the house and saw the white cap of one of the maid-servants. She had evidently heard the wheels and was looking out. He pulled off his gloves. The fly stopped before the front door, which was immediately opened by the butler. As Felix got out, and before he had paid the fly-man, he saw his mother's figure in the hall. It looked very tall and black in the lamplight. He paid the man quickly and stepped in, greeting the butler with as much cordiality as he could manage just then.

'I'm awfully sorry, mater, about being so late,' he began at once.

She kissed him eagerly without a word.

'It was most unlucky, but I couldn't help it really. You didn't go to the station, did you?'

'Never mind. So long as you have come!'

'Oh, I say, you did go! What a beastly shame. Did you wait on the platform in all this damp?'

'Oh, I was well wrapped up and kept my shawl over my mouth.'

They were in the long drawing-room now. The fire was blazing, the tea-table was drawn up by it. Felix began to feel more cheerful. He stood by the fire warming his hands.

'You had better have your tea at once or it will spoil your dinner,' said Mrs. Wilding. 'We are dining at a quarter-past seven to-night. I hope you won't mind.'

'Well, but why?'

'Because of Stephen. You see to-morrow is Sunday, and he has the early celebration. He never goes out on a Saturday as a rule. He likes to stay quietly at home and think over his sermons. But he made an exception for you.'

She spoke brightly, yet Felix felt annoyed.

'Oh, all right,' he said. 'But I'd better not have much tea, then.'

He sat down near his mother.

'Have you had yours?'

'Yes.'

She gave him his tea and some muffin, and sat looking at him while he ate and drank.

'I did not get your telegram till I had got home from the station,' she said. 'And then it was too late to send back the carriage. I am sorry you had to take a fly.'

'What did you think when I didn't come?'

'I did not know what to think. I was dreadfully afraid that perhaps you had had an accident. I thought you might have been run over.'

He laughed.

'What nonsense, mater!'

'What was it?' she said.

Felix felt rather uncomfortable.

'Well, I—I was out at lunch and made a mistake about the time. I had no idea it was half as late as it was. I'm afraid it was carelessness—partly. I am most fearfully sorry.'

He was thinking of the cheque and the telegram he had to send. There was not much time.

'You see,' he went on, 'London's so noisy and big, and there's such a lot to do in it, that it's easy to make a mistake or forget things. And then it's difficult to calculate distances and all that. I won't do it again.'

'Never mind,' his mother said again cheerfully. 'What does it matter?'

She did not even hint at her disappointment. Felix glanced at her gratefully and also a little nervously. She had her icewool shawl over her shoulders and wore, as usual, a very plain black dress. Her face was pale, but her large and gentle dark eyes looked very happy, and very good, he thought. There was no *arrière-pensée* in them, nothing to doubt, or wonder at. They were as candid and pure as a child's, but they were not childlike. The look of a woman who has suffered was in them always, but of a woman whose suffering has never made her rebel or lose her faith. For a moment Felix thought of his drive with Lady Caroline and Mrs. Ismey, and of the dreams their eyes had given him, dreams born of the ignorance they made him feel, which widened the borders between which imagination walked. When he looked at his mother's eyes how well he understood her. Imagination had no room for tortuous and delightful courses.

'It seems to me so long since you were here, Felix,' she said. 'But then my life is so very quiet now. Do the days pass quickly in London now you have your work?'

'Yes, awfully fast. But all the same it seems to me ages

since I was here. I say, mater, I 've never thanked you about the school and all that.'

'I hope you really like it?' she said.

'Rather!' said Felix. 'I think it will do me a lot of good too.'

She had not alluded to her surprise and disappointment over his refusal of Mr. Ismey's offer. He thought of that and again felt grateful, realising that she gave him his freedom without any reserve. But this very sense of gratitude made it the more difficult for him to do what he had to do.

'Will you have another cup?' she asked.

'No, thank you.'

The clock struck on the mantelpiece. The voice of the church clock echoed it.

'Six already.'

He got up and again stood by the fire.

'Mater!'

'Yes,' she said.

'You 've been tremendously good to me about money and —look here, I'm not going to be extravagant in London. I promise you that.'

Mrs. Wilding smiled. Her face was very serene to-night. It was long since she had had a moment of such happiness. This change from her new loneliness carried her back to the old days when she felt that her home was indeed home, containing all that made earth lovely for her.

'I am sure you will be careful,' she said quietly.

'Yes. But you know just at first——' he stopped. Prevarication literally stuck in his throat when he looked at her.

'Mater, I want to ask you a great favour,' he said bluntly.

'Why, what is it?' she said, pleased at the thought of being able perhaps to show the happiness his coming had given her by doing something definite for him.

'I want you—could you be most awfully kind and let me have a hundred pounds, a hundred pounds extra, I mean, as well as what I have every week?'

He felt sordid as he heard himself say it. The fact that the money was not for himself seemed to make no difference. He stood looking down at the hearthrug. Mrs. Wilding was very much surprised, and her surprise woke up vague fears. London again presented itself to her mind as a monster, dangerous and abnormal. Once more there came to her the feeling that she had a double duty towards her boy now that he was fatherless. Her natural instinct was to preserve intact the sweet atmosphere

of happiness in which she had been rejoicing, to tell Felix quickly he should have the money, and say no more about the matter. But would that be right? Would not a father's experience have suggested the need of some inquiry? Seven pounds a week, in addition to the expenses of the flat, was a very liberal allowance and should surely be much more than enough for Felix.

'Can you, mater?'

Felix's voice was rather hard. He was so uncomfortable that he looked stern.

'You could not tell me what you want the money for?' Mrs. Wilding suggested gently.

Felix felt the red mounting to his cheeks. The awkwardness of his position made him angry.

'I'm afraid not,' he said. 'I don't see—I mean, surely you can trust me. I'm not going to do anything awful with the money.'

He laughed.

'Really, mater, I do believe you're always ready to think I'm anxious to do something shocking. It is too absurd.'

'No, Felix, it isn't that at all. Only, you see, a hundred pounds is a large sum in addition to the money you have each week, and I know there are many temptations in London——'

'Oh!' he exclaimed, with a long, angry breath. 'To hear you talk, mater, one would suppose I was gambling and drinking, and going on like the boy in the picture-book, who began in the church choir as an angel and ended on the gallows. Why, look here, I can give you back the money in a week. I only want it for a week. That's all. If you think it's such a crime to spend a hundred pounds now——'

Mrs. Wilding got up, quickly for her, and went to her writing-table. A sudden feeling—wrong and weak, perhaps, she thought afterwards—had come to her that she could not let anything stand between her and her son to-night, that she could not allow the peace and happiness in which she was just beginning to rejoice to be marred. She took out her cheque-book from a drawer, and began to write a cheque. Her movement had stopped Felix's outburst. He saw what she was doing.

'Thanks, mater,' he said.

Mrs. Wilding blotted the cheque, got up, and gave it to him. She did not say anything.

'Thanks awfully,' Felix muttered, as he took it.

He put it hastily into his pocket.

'Is it safe like that?' said Mrs. Wilding.

'Oh yes, of course. I'm just going out to look round.'

'Wrap up well. Put on your coat. It's very damp.'

'Yes, I will.'

He went off to the village post-office to send the promised telegram to Mrs. Ismey. Then he visited the horses and Mab, and walked round the damp garden in the dark. He felt more comfortable alone after what had happened. Money matters were loathsome, he thought. He hated discussing them, especially with his mother. And from his feelings now he suddenly felt able to gauge Mrs. Ismey's when she asked him for the cheque. How she must have disliked doing it. He knew it was for Lady Caroline, and vaguely connected it with the revelation that she took morphia. Perhaps people who took morphia did wild things with money and got into difficulties even when they were rich. When he remembered the big house in Great Cumberland Place it seemed very odd that he should be giving financial help to its mistress. He stayed out in the garden till it was time to dress for dinner. It occurred to him that it would be kinder to go back to his mother, but, after the money incident, he knew he should feel ill at ease with her.

When he reached his bedroom he found her just coming out of it.

'Hullo!' he said, with off-hand cheeriness.

'I was just seeing if you'd got everything,' she said. 'You like the fire, I hope.'

'I should think so.'

'Welcome home, my dear boy,' she said. 'It is such a comfort to have you again.'

She kissed him. There were tears in her eyes.

'I hope you will be able to come pretty often,' she added. 'It makes the house so different.'

It was the only expression she allowed herself of her grief in her new life which was so unlike the old. And when she was alone in her room, putting on her black silk evening-gown, she wondered if she were not inclined to be a tiny bit selfish, perhaps, a little inclined to try to monopolise her boy. She resolved that she would never press him to come home. She would leave it entirely to him.

At a quarter-past seven the hall-door bell rang and, in a moment, Margot and her husband walked into the drawing-room. Felix had just come down and was standing with his mother by the fire.

Margot wore her wedding-gown turned into a dinner-dress. She came in looking very happy and rather shy. Stephen stepped behind her with an air of calm and comfortable proprietorship. After Margot had kissed her brother warmly, Stephen and he shook hands.

'I am glad to see you back,' said Stephen, with his decent air of saying what was appropriate. 'You must be glad to get out of the London gloom in this weather, especially for the Sunday.'

'I'm glad to be here, but I don't know that London is any worse than the country in bad weather,' said Felix. 'There's always plenty to do there at any rate.'

Dinner was announced.

'Will you give your arm to the bride, Felix?' said Mrs. Wilding, with a happy smile.

Margot blushed, and Felix suddenly felt exactly as if he were made of cast-iron. He had thought that he would have a great deal to say to his sister, but he felt like a stranger with her now that she belonged to Stephen. Their intimacy rose between him and Margot like a stone wall. The clergyman looked as if he had been married all his life, as if he had been born married to Margot. And not only that. He was not merely the contented husband in Hill House, he was also the happy and respectful son. It seemed to Felix that while he had been in London his mother and Stephen had learnt to understand each other with a quiet completeness unknown to them before. Stephen seemed more than one of the family as he sat at the dinner-table peacefully supping his soup. He was like all the ancestors and descendants of the Wilding stock rolled into one decent-minded, self-possessed clergyman. When Felix looked at his brother-in-law he felt as if he himself were an outsider, a vagrant, not a Wilding at all.

'And how are things in London?' asked Stephen, when the fish was handed round. 'Do you feel yourself at home there yet?'

'Oh dear, yes, quite,' answered Felix.

'Not a little strange and confused at first, trying to find your way about the streets?'

This little sketch of his situation in the metropolis presented itself to Felix as a gross and unpardonable caricature.

'I don't feel at all strange or confused,' he replied. 'I don't know why I should, exactly.'

'Oh, well, you see you are country bred,' returned Stephen,

with the calm *aplomb* of one resting upon the granite foundations of undoubted fact.

'Yes,' said Margot.

Since her marriage she had lost something of her anxious dependence, acquired something of matronly ease. It did not amount at all to dignity as yet, but it was sufficient to surprise and irritate Felix, who was ready to feel personally injured by any change wrought in his sister by Stephen. This little interjection of Margot stung him.

'I didn't know I was a bumpkin,' he exclaimed. 'But perhaps I am without knowing it.'

'Oh no, Felix,' said his mother. 'Now I feel lost in London, and all the noises confuse me. If I had to spend a month there I don't know what I should do. The air makes me feel breathless, and I am always afraid of being run over.'

'Oh, you'd soon get accustomed to all that,' said Felix shortly. 'It really is a great mistake to live too much in the country. It gives people wrong ideas of things and absurd notions about life in towns.'

All the time he was speaking he was thinking what Marza would feel if he were at Hill House that night, Marza who called London a city of barbarians.

'I should like to see all the capitals in Europe,' he added, looking rather defiantly at Stephen.

It was outrageous that he, who had sat with Marza and received the confession of King Marshall, men famous in the world, should be represented as tottering, anxious, even terrified, about the streets, trying to get accustomed to the sound of the omnibuses. Pshaw!

His mind had already, in its usual fashion, exaggerated the thing that vexed it.

'How does the school suit you?' asked Stephen, changing the conversation with a quiet deliberateness that made Felix feel small.

'Very well, thanks.'

'Yes, do tell us something about it,' said Mrs. Wilding, with a sort of anxious cheerfulness. 'Are the other pupils nice?'

'Yes, they're all right.'

He felt an invincible reluctance to talk about any part of his life in London. It was quite reasonable that his people should wish to know something about it. He knew that. And yet he felt almost a physical disinclination to discuss or describe it.

'How many of them are there?' said Stephen, taking a small

help of roast-mutton, and slightly moving his ears in the way Felix so much disliked.

'Oh, I don't know. About fourteen, I should think.'

'I am longing for you to write a book, Felix,' said Margot. 'I know you could.'

She spoke eagerly and, for the first time, with the complete naturalness and open admiration of the sister of former days. If Stephen had not been there Felix would have been pleased, but he always felt self-conscious with the clergyman.

'It's not so easy to write a book,' he said.

'A book worth writing,' assented Stephen. 'There is some sad rubbish written nowadays, and the strange and regrettable thing is that the writers often become quite well known. Only yesterday I was reading a review of a book by an Italian author in the *Discriminator*. It is evidently the most wicked nonsense and was completely condemned. Yet the critic spoke as if the author had become quite a famous man.'

'Who was the author?' asked Felix quickly.

'I believe he is called Marza. The name of the book was a very foolish one, I thought, and did not certainly suggest a subject at all likely to do good to any one.'

'I remember you told me,' interposed Margot, in eager agreement with her husband. 'It was *Ashes*. And the critic said that such ashes were fit only for the dust-bin.'

Felix's cheeks flamed with contempt and anger. He quite forgot any dislike he had felt to the book, any consciousness he had had of Marza's egoism, selfishness or morbidity. At that moment he was as indignant as if his dearest friend were being attacked, and the lawless liberty, the frank defiance of Marza's life and thought were entirely glorious to him. That a Stephen Bosanfield should venture even to express an opinion on a Marza struck him as a crime.

'I have read the book and it is splendid,' he exclaimed. 'Simply splendid. And I know Marza too. He is the most delightful man in the world.'

Mrs. Wilding and Margot looked astonished.

'How did you come to meet such a man?' said Stephen, showing also some, though much less, surprise. The *Discriminator* seemed, I thought, to hint that he was a person without religion, who led, and even inculcated, a very unseemly sort of life.'

'Oh, unseemly!' cried Felix.

In that word all that he was ready to rise up in arms against seemed enshrined as in a dreadful casket of mean and miserable design.

'Why, I met him at dinner at your own friends!' he added triumphantly. 'I dare say Mr. Ismey published the English translation of that very book.'

'Perhaps so. I did not look to see,' said Stephen. 'I am afraid Francis is sometimes a little too much influenced by his wife in what books he publishes. She has very odd ideas.'

He shut his mouth with a snap.

'She's got brains, thank Heaven!' said Felix, almost fiercely.

Some evil angel was surely tempting his brother-in-law to touch on every subject which could lead to controversy.

'She seemed to me to be very clever,' said Mrs. Wilding, with obvious anxiety to restore calm to the conversation. 'I dare say she is often a great help to her husband.'

Felix laughed. He could not help it. His mother's attempt to turn Mrs. Ismey into a sort of pattern wife struck him as singularly ridiculous. He thought of his visit to Marza. Merciful Heavens! How true had been the poet's remark about the sound of the tarantella and the frayed cord. What on earth could his mother and Stephen understand of him, or of the young generation that lives in cities, that is keen of intellect, and passionate of heart, and hot with desire, that looks up and sees how huge is the flank of the mountain, that realises how short is the time for wandering. He forgot that he had felt constrained and guilty with Marza, nervous when he peeped, as it were, into the poet's intimate life. Everything that was in him just then seemed pouring, like some furious torrent, towards the realm where such men live in freedom, and in contempt of all opinions save their own.

'I don't know whether she's a help to her husband or not,' he said; 'but at any rate she reads books for their literature, not for their moral. Why, if the moral of a book makes its merit, I suppose the *Fairchild Family* is a great work.'

He laughed again, briefly, looking at Stephen.

'Literature ought to do good,' said Stephen, with calmness, even with a certain air of authority. 'If it does not it is certain to do harm. And all that does harm is more than worthless; it is wicked.'

Felix opened his mouth to make a vehement retort, but just as he was going to speak something in the assured and almost phlegmatic expression of his brother-in-law's brick-red face struck him and he remained silent. What was the good of putting forth his views in such a circle? He could see by Margot's eyes that she was hanging on Stephen's words. His mother no doubt agreed with them too. Of course she did. He began to

hate the very idea of all that did good. And what was good? Had not the brain a right to the food it craved for as well as the soul? And was it to be fed everlastingly on milk for babes, or Bosanfield's food for parishioners? The soul calls most loudly for love, human or divine. But does not the brain call for the many clashing wonders of life that it may review them, at least, ere it reject them?

For the rest of dinner Felix felt as if he were sitting with three enemies. The talk was uneasy and was chiefly carried on by Mrs. Wilding and Stephen. It often fell on parish concerns. When at length Mrs. Wilding and Margot went into the drawing-room Felix was obliged to come out of the shell into which he had scornfully retired.

'Will you smoke?' he said to Stephen.

'No thanks, I never do,' replied his brother-in-law.

'Well, I will if you don't mind.'

He lit his cigarette, wondering what on earth they could find to talk about.

'How do you think your dear mother is looking?' said Stephen, playing with a dessert-knife, which he kept on lifting about an inch from the table and then dropping.

'Oh, all right, isn't she?'

'We thought she was rather pallid lately.'

'But she always is pale. I don't see any difference.'

'I am glad to hear it. We were afraid perhaps the dulness of being alone here was preying a little on her spirits.'

It immediately occurred to Felix that this might be meant for a covert rebuke to him. If so, he thought it came peculiarly ill from the man who had taken away Margot.

'But I suppose she sees a lot of Margot, doesn't she?' he said, in a strained voice, shooting a hostile glance at his brother-in-law, who was gazing meditatively at the table, and still fidgeting with the dessert-knife.

'Naturally, a good deal. But of course Margot has got her duties now.'

'Why, what duties?'

'At home and in the parish.'

'I should think her duty to her own mother would come before her duty to the parish,' said Felix.

The sound of the word parish began to make him sick.

'One has to make certain sacrifices for the common good,' returned Stephen. 'Inclination cannot always come first. If it did we should have no missionaries and no missionaries' wives. The Bible itself teaches us that family ties are not everything.'

Felix was staring at his brother-in-law's hand, as it mechanically lifted and let fall the silver knife. Why was it that Stephen said and did everything that most acutely irritated him? This little movement alone drove him almost mad. He looked away and made a sudden, violent resolve to be calm, even philosophic. After all, what did it matter? Stephen would have nothing to do with the conduct of his life, thank Heaven, so it was folly in him to allow himself to be made so easily angry.

'I should think it might be very interesting to be a missionary,' he said, with the intention, fortunately realised, of giving Stephen a conversational lead.

Henceforth, during the short time they remained in the dining-room, the talk, or rather Stephen's monologue, flowed. He was well informed on missionary enterprise and, as he produced his knowledge, forgot to fidget. Felix appeared to be listening to him attentively. In reality he was thinking, with a sort of libertine's relish, of the life—so mercifully different from that now being exposed—to which he would return on Monday.

When he was alone with his mother, after the punctual departure at ten o'clock of Margot and her husband, he could not resist saying:

'Mater, if I lived with Stephen for a hundred years I should never find a subject we could agree on. It seems awfully odd to me that my own sister can be married to him.'

'Oh, but Felix I am sure you would agree with him about many things.'

'Never, never. I expect you will be shocked at what I'm going to say, but I can't help it.'

'What is it?'

Mrs. Wilding was sitting by the fire. She looked very tired, but Felix did not notice it. He was not tired.

'The more I live the more it seems to me that religion narrows people and squeezes up their intellects.'

Mrs. Wilding did not say anything for a minute. An anxious expression came into her face, but quickly died away as she summoned that carefully sought-for father's spirit to her aid.

'I am not clever,' she said at length, 'and you are.'

'Rot, mater!' cried Felix, in a voice that protested but did not sound ill-pleased. 'I wish to goodness I was.'

'But don't you think,' she continued, 'that it is dangerous to put the intellect before everything else? I sometimes fancy that quite stupid people can tell things just by their hearts that very clever people could never guess at with their heads. It is

a great help to many of us if it is so. And if it were not we might even be turned away from our belief in God by a brilliant man or woman who did not believe in Him. But how impossible that is.'

'How do you know?' he said, with good-natured mischief. 'Has any one ever tried to make you an atheist?'

'No. But nobody could.'

'You conceited old mater!'

Mrs. Wilding smiled. This little talk by the fire, free, unrestrained, brought her a happiness she had not known for a long time. She had her boy to herself and he was being natural with her.

'I hope not,' she answered. 'But I think God teaches us much more through our hearts than perhaps we often realise.'

'Well, but then if you love anybody very much you ought to be able to understand them.'

'And don't you think it often is so?'

'H'm! No, I don't think it follows. But you're tired and you ought to go to bed, instead of sitting there arguing away into the watches of the night.'

It had just struck him that his mother was pale and that, despite the happy expression in them, her eyes looked very weary. Their parting at his bedroom door was comfortable in its equality of two affections, a rare thing, and when Felix was in bed he was conscious of an unusual sensation of serenity, security. The enclosed garden was outside his window instead of the London street haunted by unknown wanderers. And just across the landing was a possession—a heart that loved him completely. Deep was the silence. In it, ere he fell asleep, he felt rather like a child again. The little talk with his mother had banished a sensation of dawning jealousy, which he had not acknowledged to himself, but which had nevertheless been stirred up in him by the sight of Stephen's family air in Hill House. Deep was the silence, deep as the silence of the forest near La Maison des Alouettes. He shut his eyes and called up the tailor's hut. How wonderful his life, with its changes, was to him. Just before sleep came the thought, silly he told himself, with drowsy incredulity of his own mental statement, that no other life could seem quite so wonderful to the human being living it as his life did to him.

When Felix and his mother came in after morning church the next day the butler, with an air of rather deep importance, as if the bearer of possibly fateful tidings, walked into the drawing-room with a salver on which lay a brown envelope.

'A telegram for you, ma'am,' he said.

'A telegram on Sunday!' said Mrs. Wilding, in some astonishment. 'What can it be? I hope nothing dreadful has happened.'

She looked at the envelope, then opened it quickly. As she read it Felix watched her with some curiosity. He wondered, too, why his mother should have a telegram on Sunday. He never remembered such a thing happening before. As his mother read a look of great surprise, even a startled look, came into her face. She stood for a moment as if hesitating. Then she said:

'I am very sorry, Felix. I have made a mistake. This must be meant for you.'

Felix turned scarlet. A sudden suspicion of what the telegram might be darted into his mind.

'For me!' he said, holding out his hand, and trying to look indifferent.

'Yes. There was only "Wilding" on the envelope.'

She gave him the telegram, and added:

'I will go up and take off my things.'

She went out of the room at once. Felix read:

'You dear boy such a weight off my mind to know it can be managed love Valeria.'

'Love—Valeria.' And his mother had read it! He had felt guilty as he came out of Marza's room at the Carlton, but now—His whole body tingled. His sensations were so many and so mingled that, at first, a consciousness of hot, dull confusion dominated him. Then he longed to start off at once for London without seeing his mother before he went. But he must see her. He must sit down and go through lunch alone with her. He stared at the envelope. Yes, there was only 'Wilding' on it. Why had Mrs. Ismey been so careless? He felt a sort of fury at her carelessness. He read the telegram again and was amazed at the wording of it. 'Love—Valeria.' What must his mother think? What did he think himself? He said to himself that of course Mrs. Ismey had been carried away by an impulse of gratitude. After all he had been able to do something for her and to do it promptly. He crushed the paper up in his hand and ran up to his bedroom.

Cold water was what he wanted before he faced his mother at lunch.

When the gong sounded he came down. He wondered whether she would make any further allusion to the telegram,

and tried to decide what to say if she did. But he did not arrive at any conclusion. As he entered the drawing-room where she was waiting for him he stole a hasty glance at her. She looked calm and not specially troubled, he thought. He did not know what he had expected her to look like. At lunch they talked, but without any of the freedom and comfort of the preceding night. Felix felt stiff with self-consciousness and constraint. He was thankful when the meal was over.

'Are you coming to afternoon church?' his mother asked, as they were getting up from the table.

'Yes—no. I don't know that I shall. I think I'll take Mab for a run in the valley,' he answered hastily, longing to be alone. 'Don't wait for me if I'm late.'

Solitude was a necessity to him just then. As he started out for his walk with the mastiff he stopped at the village post-box to drop into it an envelope containing the cheque endorsed and addressed to Mrs. Ismey. He had not written even a note. He did not know what to say, so he said nothing. Church was over and darkness was falling when he came back from the valley. On the road he passed several rustics going to their homes. They were all dressed in their best clothes, and walked with a sort of lolloping stiffness, holding their arms well out from their sides. Although the evening light was faint, and they only saw him for an instant, it seemed to Felix as if they divined at once the turmoil of his mind.

Near the school three youths went by. They were laughing loudly, guffawing with the countrified *abandon* which suggests a sort of heavy, and almost innocent, impropriety. Felix looked round when he had passed them, and saw that they were staring after him and that they had stopped laughing. He hurried on. At that moment he longed for the huge secrecy of London, and had an absurd, an almost mad sensation of being a criminal standing under an electric light. He cursed himself for what he called his rawness. It was unworthy even of a schoolboy, and he was a man.

'Must you really go back to-morrow?' his mother asked at tea.

'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

'By the early train?'

'I think I'd better. If I don't I shall be late at the school.'

'Very well. I'll order the carriage,' she said quietly. 'Do tell me a little about the school. I really know nothing.'

This time Felix was thankful to talk about Sam and the pupils. His mother sat on the sofa listening. Presently she said:

'I think I must put my feet up.'

'Why? Are you tired?'

'I am rather. Sunday is a tiring day.'

She lay down, spreading a rug over her feet.

'I say, mater, you aren't seedy, are you?' he said.

'No, I don't know that I am. But I get tired rather easily. It is old age, I suppose.'

She smiled.

'Nonsense—old age! Why, you are quite young still.'

'I don't feel young,' she answered. 'But I cannot expect to. I am really very fortunate to have such good health as I do. Tell me a little more about Mr. Carringbridge. Should I like him?'

There was always supper on Sunday at Hill House instead of dinner, in order that the servants might have less to do. When it was over the hands of the clock pointed to half-past nine. Felix was starting at a quarter-past eight on the following morning.

'I shall go to bed early,' he said, 'so as not to be sleepy to-morrow morning. Breakfast at a quarter to eight, I suppose?'

'Yes. I have told the servants. Your visit has gone so quickly.'

'I'll come again very soon.'

At ten, just as they were preparing to go to bed, Mrs. Wilding said, as with an effort:

'Felix.'

'Well, mater?'

'I have something to say to you.'

Instantly Felix felt as if his whole nature stood to arms. He knew, rather than guessed, that his mother was going to speak about the telegram.

'Why, what is it?' he said.

'I have been thinking most of the day whether I ought to say anything about it or not,' Mrs. Wilding said, still speaking with an obvious effort; 'but you—you have no father now, and that is a terrible loss to a boy on the threshold of life.'

'I'm old enough to take care of myself,' Felix said coldly.

He longed to get away and to be alone, shut up safely in his bedroom. Mrs. Wilding did not say anything more for a minute. She was struggling against her desire to keep silence altogether. At last she said:

'As you know, I read that telegram to-day quite by accident.'

'Well?'

'I am very sorry I did read anything of yours.'

'It doesn't matter. Why should it?'

He spoke defiantly now.

'I do not say it does. Still—Felix, now you are alone in London, I hope you will be very careful with—with women.'

Mrs. Wilding's voice faltered slightly. A flush had risen in her pale cheeks. In her whole life she had never before felt such painful discomfort.

'I don't know what you mean,' said Felix.

'That was—that telegram was not quite——'

'I can't discuss that telegram, mater. I'd better tell you at once. You ought never to have opened it.'

'How could I know?' she said simply.

'I don't say you could. But anyhow, the least you could do, having opened it, was to say nothing about it. I should have thought you'd see that. There is such a thing as a sense of delicacy about people's private concerns.'

It was the most brutal thing he had ever said, but he was too hot, too quivering with sensitiveness and reserve, to understand the brutality of it. He wanted to protect his reserve at whatever cost.

'Good night, mater. I'm off to bed,' he said.

Without kissing her, or touching her hand, he left the room, went upstairs, and was quickly in his bedroom behind a locked door.

At half-past eleven, when he was lying awake, and still quivering like a horse lashed with the whip, he heard a gentle tap at the door. He did not answer. The tap came again, and he heard his mother's voice say:

'Are you awake? It's mother.'

He guessed that she could not sleep till she had wished him good night. He had no fear of her again alluding to the telegram. But he could not reply. He did not feel exactly angry.

He simply felt that, after what had occurred, he would rather die than be kissed by his mother. So he made no answer, and lay perfectly still.

After a moment he heard a very faint rustle on the landing, and presently the sound of a door closing. She had gone back to her room.

He lay awake, wishing that he could have brought himself to endure her kiss.

CHAPTER XXI

FELIX had secretly hoped that his mother would not be down the next morning to bid him farewell, and that he would be able at the last moment to rush into her room with all the traveller's hurry, give her a hasty kiss, and be off with few words and fewer glances; but when he came into the dining-room at a quarter to eight she was already there, sitting in her place before the silver tea-urn. He kissed her quickly and standing rather behind her.

'You oughtn't to have got up,' he said.

'I want to see as much of you as I can,' she replied. 'And I shall have all day to lie down in afterwards.'

The words struck him for a moment. He felt the acuteness of the difference between her life and his, the emptiness and the solitude of the one, the fulness and the companionship of the other.

'I wish you would have some one to stay with you,' he said, drinking his tea as if he had no time to lose.

'Oh, I am very well as I am,' she answered. 'I do not care for many people and a visitor might find it dull.'

And again a vision of a grey life dawned in his imagination. It died out when he was in the carriage. He drove himself in the dogcart, and turned, as he started, to flourish his whip to the black figure standing on the doorstep. Just at that moment the vision was very clear within him and stirred something in his heart. But his mare trotted briskly in the sharp morning air. The country things stood round in the light, tremulous mist to greet him. And beyond them, the way he was going, was London with all its bells, its cries, its incidents. The vision faded as the mare pulled against the rein, and the fluttering touch was removed from his heart.

Youth had its way.

He forced himself to work at Sam's, and the excitement of his mind—for now he was near the sender of the telegram and full of vague, yet acute, anticipations—helped him to do what was for him good work. There was energy, blood in it, young,

careless fire, and the pulse of a racer quickening to the post. For the first time since he had been at Sam's he felt that he had grip, something at least of power. In the late afternoon, when many of the pupils had hastened to their idleness, he showed up what he had done to Sam. That serene personage was seated by his delicious fire—his fires were always perfect, precisely suited to the temperature, never suggestive either of the grey ashes of regret or of a place predestined to the wicked —smoking a cigar as usual, and reading a volume of Froude with tender appreciation. He turned his head as Felix came in with his manuscript, and, seeing it, extended a soft, white hand.

'Sit down, Mr. Wilding, while I read it,' he murmured. 'I will read it now. I am staying in London to-night to make a speech at a Savages' dinner.'

Felix sat down in great delight. He had written in a glow and longed for a judgment. Sam put on his *pince-nez*. He only used them to read manuscript. Looking at Felix over the gold rims of the glasses with his radiant eyes he said:

'Take a cigar, Mr. Wilding, if you want to please me.'

'Thank you awfully,' said Felix, surprised at the honour, which had never before been conferred upon him.

He took one, lit it, and found it most excellent. He sat in attentive silence, looking into the neat, clear fire while Sam was reading. The rustling of his pages as they were turned by the soft, white fingers, gave him a pleasant little thrill. In the falling twilight the bourdon of the traffic of the Strand seemed to him very musical. He was glad to be back in London. Its activities fed him with the food his soul demanded. To its cries an essential cry in him responded. Not silence but sound was the thing his youth desired, not peace but the strivings of energy, the movement onward, the mighty flowing of the torrent into the gulf of the future.

Sam laid down the manuscript, took off his *pince-nez*, and looked at Felix through the smoke of the two cigars.

'You will certainly get on, Mr. Wilding,' he said.

'Do you think I shall?' Felix said eagerly.

'I do not think. I say you will certainly get on. With you it is merely a question of time, and questions of time are soon settled. I am not quite sure that you will get on as a journalist.'

'Oh, but how then?'

'You have a good deal that the journalist need not have. You could deal with psychology—later—more powerfully even

than with incident. By incident you may take it that I mean just now the figures carried out by the dancers in the masque of life.'

He paused with a smile—his leading-article smile Arliss irreverently called it. Rhetorical interrogation was conveyed by it, the happy question, 'Am I brilliant?'

'But that power, being more profound than the merely descriptive power that finds food for its energies in outward things, develops more slowly. Youth shows in such writing as you care for, and undertake, more clearly than it would in writing of lesser quality. Live, be greedy of experience. I dare say I gave you that advice when you first came. I usually do give it. But to you, now, I give it with special knowledge of your aptitudes. If *you* dig deep you will certainly find water-springs.'

He smiled again on Felix's enchanted silence.

'Are you cultivating the society of women?' he purred.

The blood mounted to Felix's forehead.

'I know some,' he replied.

'Ah! I once met an Englishman who spoke very perfect French. I asked him how he had arrived at such perfection. "By the only possible way," he replied. "Instead of a mistress, I took a *maîtresse*." I fear he must have been a libertine. Still, do you know, Mr. Wilding, there was a good deal in it, there was really a good deal in it. Are you acquainted with any clever women? I do not mean bluestockings; I mean what I say—clever women.'

'Well, I—I know Mrs. Ismey,' said Felix, half reluctantly.

He did not wish to mention her, and yet he was driven to.

'The wife of the publisher?' said Sam.

'Yes.'

'I have met her.'

He sat looking at Felix in a twinkling silence which, to the boy, was enigmatic.

'She is quite worthy of your study, quite capable, I should say, of assisting you to a more profound psychology. Good-bye. I will go through the article with you bit by bit to-morrow. To do so now would take the edge off our sensations, and I always hesitate to take the edge off anything.'

Felix went out and left him by the neat, clear fire, smiling.

'You clever brute!' Felix muttered to himself outside the door.

He always left Sam with that sort of feeling, nor was the noun malignant. It stood for Sam's contented cynicism, analytical

faculty and lack of expectation. He was surely never disappointed. For what did he expect of any one, even of himself?

In the writing-hall Felix found no one but Paul Chalmers, and he was shutting up his manuscripts in a shiny black bag, and putting the pink lid carefully on the round box of cream chocolates from which he sought inspiration.

'Which way are you going?' Felix asked.

He had no idea where Chalmers lived.

'I shall take a 'bus from the corner by Charing Cross, Mr. Wilding,' said Chalmers. 'I always think it clears the brain to take a short portion of exercise after labour, the labour of the intellect, I mean.'

He put on his enormous top-hat, and lifted his bag from the table.

'Shall we go together as far as Charing Cross?' said Felix.

He was conscious of a need of companionship, of intercourse just then, for he was feeling rather exultant.

'With all the pleasure in life, Mr. Wilding,' replied Chalmers. 'After you.'

They were at the swing door. When they reached the Strand, they found a slight fog brooding over its turmoil. Chalmers at once called Felix's attention to it.

'Turneresque effects, Mr. Wilding,' he remarked. 'Bits of Mr. Whistler all round us, ain't—aren't there? I take note of it all as I go. Mr. Carringbridge advises the procedure. "Everything," he says, "is provender to the active mind." I never cease to endeavour to keep mine active.'

He walked with a loose, baggy sort of stride, which was rather grotesque, and, as he spoke, swung out one hand, covered by a purplish-brown kid glove, lined with wool, and edged with a bit of ragged fur, in an awkward gesture that made Felix feel almost ashamed for him. There was something tragic about Chalmers, the tragedy of a commonplace, ineffective mind struggling to be important and masterly, yet haunted by an anxiety which was very near to humbleness. Felix was specially conscious of it to-day, because he was specially conscious that he really had some of the power which Chalmers struggled for, as a man entombed in a narrow well struggles to lift himself somehow, anyhow, to the light.

'Activity is the great thing,' continued Chalmers, shouldering his way through the thronging pedestrians upon the narrow pavement, 'and the steady acquirement of useful knowledge.

Do you go much to the reading-room of the British Museum, Mr. Wilding?'

'I have never been there,' said Felix. 'I say, don't bother to call me "Mr." Wilding.'

'That makes one conscious of the smallness of one's powers,' said Chalmers. 'And yet comes the thought afterwards—what man has done man can do.'

He shook his head. Felix could not help observing that he was hoping to be leonine.

'And so one strives, keeping in mind all them—those that have striven in the past.'

Felix was almost irresistibly moved to have it out with Chalmers, to be truthful with him, to tell him, 'Look here, you are aiming at a target you will never hit.' But his companion was in an unusually talkative mood, and continued:

'Oh Mr. Wilding, you don't know what life is to me now. Piano-tuning is a dreadful business, it really is. All them—those years I spent at it seems like a sort of nightmare now, as I might say. Day after day getting instruments in tune, and feeling all the time as one was made for better things if one but had the chance to strike at them. Often and often, when running up a scale, have I known I was unsuited to the profession. And yet I was in great request for the job. But now I'm in the right line, and I can put my heart in it. I don't speak like this to every one, Mr. Wilding, but you have been so kind that I do feel I can open out a bit to you.'

How could Felix speak the truth to him? After all, he was so eager to succeed that perhaps he—no. But there are some hair-shirts that certain people cannot put on. The hair-shirt of truth-telling to Chalmers was too rough for the skin of Felix.

'You know I wish you success,' he said, with a forced energy.

He watched the lanky figure mounting to the summit of the 'bus, pursued, as it seemed, by fluttering coat-tails.

'Poor chap!' he muttered, as he turned away, after receiving a last sweeping salute from that expressive gloved hand.

He felt more pity for Chalmers than he had felt for his mother when he left her on the doorstep that morning after his constrained farewell.

When he reached his flat he found a letter lying on his table. He picked it up quickly and looked at the direction. It was in Mrs. Ismey's handwriting, and though he was in a hurry to see what the letter contained, he could not help stopping for a minute to stare at the address. Why did she write like that? If writing expresses character, surely hers must be strangely

weak, strangely marred in some way. And yet that was not the case. Her relations with Lady Caroline showed determination, strength. He had been utterly wrong in his thought of the two playing women. The voice which had whispered within him 'master—servant' had told a lie. Lady Caroline's was the weak nature. How people tricked him! He opened the letter, which, like the address, was written in the feeble, half-illegible, and straggling hand, now beginning to be familiar to him.

'YOU DEAR, KIND BOY,—How can I ever thank you? Come to see me at once. I shall be in to-day at five. You don't know what you have done for a hard-up being. Now if you don't come to-day I shall go into mauve.

'Excuse great haste. Love and thousands of gratitudes.—Yours, V. I.

'*P.S.*—God bless you. I will never forget your generosity. V.'

When Felix, with some difficulty, had made out the meaning of the note, he caught up his hat and, in a moment, was on his way to Green Street in a hansom. As he was driving down the street he met a brougham with some luggage on the top going towards Park Lane. The face of a man appeared at the brougham window, lit up for a moment by the ray of a lamp. Felix thought it looked like Mr. Ismey's face, but he was not quite sure. He reached the house and rang the bell. The man-servant evidently expected him, and showed him up at once without waiting to be asked if Mrs. Ismey was at home. The drawing-room was empty.

'I will tell Mrs. Ismey you are here, sir,' he said, going out.

Felix waited for some time. He walked about the pretty room, glancing at the pictures, the ornaments, the books. There were many of the latter lying about. All of them were modern books, just published. He read the titles of some, and even glanced into them. But he was restless with anticipation, and he wondered how people can sit down with the noise of London in their ears, their minds full of the thoughts, the myriad thoughts that come out of their hiding-places in great cities, to plunge into the minds, the thoughts of others.

When Mrs. Ismey came into the room at last she came in quickly, with an expression of contrition on her face.

'Forgive me,' she said. 'You are so late that I thought you were not coming, and had gone up to put on mauve. You see

I am wearing it still. I did not dare to keep you waiting while I changed.'

She was, in fact, wearing a mauve tea-gown, which Felix thought quite lovely, and she, too, looked prettier than he had ever seen her look before. There was a delicious colour in her cheeks. Her beautiful, live hair seemed shot with the hues of light. Her eyes were shining with vivacity, and had, he fancied, something of a child's eagerness caught in them. And her hands—well, her hands were exquisite to-day. As he took one shyly in his he longed to kiss it.

'Why are you so late?' she asked, sitting down on a sofa.

She touched the sofa and smiled at him, screwing up her eyes. He sat down beside her.

'I was working hard.'

'Oh, working!'

Her voice sounded half mischievous, half vexed.

'You men have so many things that interest you,' she continued. 'I believe if I were to die you would go down to that school of yours on the day of my funeral.'

'I cannot imagine you dying,' Felix answered.

'Can you imagine me going to Paris?'

'To Paris?' he exclaimed. 'Are you going away?'

'Would you mind if I did?'

To-day she had returned to the light, drawling, half-mischievous banter which had mystified him on the evening when he first met her. It made him feel his youth now as it had then.

'Oh, you know I have my work. You have just said so,' he answered.

'Don't fight me with my own weapons,' she said.

Her manner was as radiant as her appearance. There was a strong flush in her cheeks now, and her odd, hazel eyes sparkled with an almost fierce vivacity.

'I thought I met your husband just now,' Felix said.

'Probably you did. He was starting for the station.'

'Then he is going away too?'

'Yes, for some time. He goes to Berlin first—some conference—then to Rome. Business of course. I should feel horribly lonely here without him, and so—yes—I am going to Paris, with Carrie—to get gowns for the winter.'

The last words tantalised Felix. He knew they were meant to tantalise him. She was not going to Paris only to get gowns. She had some other project which excited and pleased her, some secret project. And it was that which had set the flush on her

cheeks and filled her eyes with dancing fire. Her heart was certainly glowing with anticipation.

'You always play with me,' he said.

He scarcely knew why, but suddenly he felt miserable, alone, and ridiculous, as if he were so young or so stupid that nobody could think of sharing anything with him, either a pleasure or a pain.

'You treat me as if I were still a schoolboy.'

He let his voice be angry.

'I!'

'Yes, you. It isn't fair.'

Even as he said the words he thought how like an angry schoolboy's they sounded, and was furious with himself.

'You forget that I'm nearly twenty-one,' he exclaimed, speaking to get away from that last sentence of his and to blot it out from her memory. 'I may be young, but I'm not a boy, and I don't see why you should always treat me as if I were one.'

With every word he spoke the sense of wrong grew stronger within him.

'I hate it!' he exclaimed.

Her face had quite changed. The radiance went out of it, but not the air of keen life. In her eyes the sparkle of joy was replaced by a sparkle of—was it tenderness?

'You are wrong,' she said, quite gravely. 'I have treated you as a man.'

'When?'

'One doesn't borrow money of a schoolboy, or trust him with the sad secret of a friend. You are treating me unjustly.'

Felix said nothing. His wound still hurt, despite the salve she had just applied to it.

'You ought to see that.'

'Perhaps.'

He spoke reluctantly.

'I believe you are angry with me just because I am happy to-day,' she said abruptly.

As she spoke he knew that she spoke the exact truth. It was something in her evident joy which had vexed him, because it seemed to remove her from him, to carry her away into a region beyond his reach.

'No, I want you to be happy, of course,' he said grimly.

'Shall I tell you why I am happy?' she asked.

She leant a little towards him quickly, almost like a child does when it is in such delight that it longs to seize hold of the nearest person, to have the human contact which gives such

vital evidence of the human power to double joy by sharing it. And, when she said that, he was suddenly happier.

'But I know,' he answered, still keeping his hard manner, yet all ready to melt. 'It is because you are going to Paris—to buy new dresses.'

'It is because I am going to Paris.'

'I say I know it is.'

'I shall buy new gowns there, of course. A woman who goes to Paris and comes away without having bought new gowns is not a woman but a monster. But it is not that which makes me so happy. No, no, it isn't that.'

All her extraordinary vivacity had come back. The fire of joy blazed up again in her fiercely.

'What is it?' he asked.

The fierceness of her joy waked in him a fierceness of curiosity to know why it came.

'I am going with Carrie. I am going to cure Carrie.'

'Of—of——?'

'This morphia habit which is killing her. There is a man in Paris. I heard his name some time ago, but when my husband is in London I am not free. He hates Carrie so much that he would be furious if he thought I was travelling anywhere with her.'

'But Lady Caroline comes here and you go to her?'

'Yes. He allows that. He has to. But he would never let me travel with her.'

'But how strange!' Felix said.

He spoke with conviction, and had the sensation of walking in darkness, conscious of a maze of subtle motives, whose threads he was unable to trace either to the centre from which they sprang, or to the verge towards which they radiated.

'You think so? He met me first when I was travelling with her.'

'Well, but—but he loves you.'

In her last words he had altogether failed to find the reason he sought. He showed that he had bluntly. She only smiled, but in the smile there was a sadness which made him wonder whether there was not some tragedy in this pretty house whose nature he had never even dimly suspected.

'I am stupid,' he exclaimed. 'You must think me stupid.'

'No, but I think women often expect in men the sort of cleverness which men never possess. I have to deceive Francis. He will not know I have been to Paris with Carrie. Do you think it's wrong?'

She was speaking eagerly again, with an intense eagerness which was like heat puffing into the room.

'I don't know,' Felix said. 'It's rather dreadful having to tell lies to anybody one cares for, I think.'

She looked anxious, keenly anxious. Every expression, every movement, every word of hers this evening had an edge to it, sharp like the edge of a well-tempered dagger.

'Yes, isn't it? I hate it so. If I tell a lie I feel at once as if I had dwindled down into something dwarfish and deformed. But, think, this is for Carrie, for my oldest friend, to save her really from ruin. I can't tell you everything. It would take too long, and besides I don't think I ought. It's too terrible. When morphia once gets hold of any one——'

She stopped, with a sort of catch in her voice.

'No, I can't go into it. But if something isn't done, Carrie is doomed. Now if anything I can do can save her, oughtn't I to do it?'

Felix had quite lost his pained sense of being a boy now that he was being consulted as a man.

'I suppose you ought,' he answered.

'Even if to do it I have to deceive my husband and risk my own happiness. For if Francis ever found out—but don't let us think of that!'

A sort of shudder ran through her body. The vivacity of all her emotions was so great that there was something almost melodramatic in her manner. And this seemed to grow as she talked, as if talking increased her powers of sensation and filled her with a sort of light, heady intoxication.

'I think there are moments in one's life when one ought to shut one's eyes to possible consequences and go blindly forward,' she went on. 'Blindly, blindly.'

She shut her eyes, as if to revel in the luxury of darkness and of movement in it.

'That's what I mean to do now. I'll shut my eyes and save Carrie.'

'But don't you ever think of yourself?' Felix said, wondering.

It struck him as intensely strange that he should come upon a virtue of his mother in Mrs. Ismey. They were so unlike that it seemed almost impossible that they could touch at any point.

'What woman does when she really cares?' said Mrs. Ismey. 'And I do really care for Carrie.'

With an abruptness that was fearful to Felix she burst into tears. The change from joy to grief startled him so much that,

for a moment, he sat quite still listening to her sobbing. She turned her head away from him, took out her handkerchief, and held it pressed against her face just under her eyes. Her body trembled convulsively.

'Don't,' Felix said. 'Don't!'

It was all he could say. Very shyly he moved nearer to her on the sofa, held out his hand to touch her, then drew it back.

'What is the matter? Why do you cry? Can't I do anything?'

For the first time she pressed the handkerchief actually against her eyes.

'No, no, it 's all right. I 'm foolish.'

She turned towards him again. Her face was still slightly distorted by the spasm of grief, but already she had begun to smile, though tears stood in her eyes.

'All this worry about Carrie has wrecked my nerves,' she said. 'That is the truth. I am going to Paris as much for my sake as hers, so I am not unselfish.'

'I think you are, very.'

'No, no, I 'm not. How foolish you must think me, crying like that for nothing at all. And I had just been so happy.'

'Yes.'

He could not find anything to say. He was feeling too much and too confusedly.

'It just occurred to me how awful it would be if this man couldn't do Carrie any good. He 's a hypnotist.'

'A hypnotist?'

'Yes. If she can give up her will to his it may all come right. His charges are awful, but to cure her would be worth any money.'

Felix suddenly realised why Mrs. Ismey had asked him for that cheque. It must be to pay this man; doctor, hypnotist, whatever he was. Mr. Ismey must have decided rather suddenly on his journey abroad, leaving the way to Paris open for the two friends. The moment had to be seized and, for some reason, Lady Caroline could not lay her hand on this large fee just at the instant when she wanted it. He began to see more clearly into some things which had puzzled him.

'When do you go?' he asked.

'On Wednesday.'

'And shall you stay long?'

'No, only till Saturday I think. I must be back. Francis will expect letters from me, and I can't post them in Paris, and I don't care to send them under cover to be posted in

England. Oh, it 's horrid, isn't it, to be deceitful, however good the cause?'

Just before she said that Felix had been thinking that it was horrid. Mr. Ismey's face had come to him, with its dignified expression and its sad, almost bitter, eyes. It was the face of a very 'straight' man, he thought.

'Sometimes I think I 'll give it all up, and give Carrie up too,' she exclaimed, watching him. 'She doesn't really want to be cured. She loves it too much for that.'

'What is there to love in it?' asked Felix.

Curiosity about this strange morphia fascination was beginning to dawn in him.

'Why!' she began eagerly, leaning towards him while her face lit up as it had not lit up since she burst into tears. 'Every——' She checked herself sharply. 'Well, according to her, it must be an exquisite sensation. She has told me all about it. I'm quite learned on the subject. It's rather curious, isn't it, being steeped in knowledge of a thing you simply loathe and have a horror of? She will talk about it incessantly. That's one of the symptoms of her kind of case, I believe.'

Felix thought of Lady Caroline, as he had seen her and known her. It was strange to hear her spoken of as a 'case.' He still felt a reluctance to learn her secret, combined with a desire to know it in all its fulness. The two sensations were at war, and now one made a bid for victory.

'Perhaps—I say, d'you think I ought to hear all this?' he said. 'You know if I could do any good it would be all right. But could I?'

'I've thought of it all,' Mrs. Ismey said, with unusual determination. 'Perhaps it's selfish and weak of me, but I do care for your good opinion.'

'Mine?' he said, moving a little nearer to her. 'But, you know——'

'I know very well I might lose it, as things are, unless I told you the truth. When one is acting for any one in Carrie's condition, trying to save her, one gets mixed up in all sorts of things, and with all sorts of dreadful people. If I am perfectly sincere with you, I feel that you at least can never mistake my motives.'

'But, then, why not tell your husband?' said Felix.

He said it moved by the desire we sometimes have to lay a whip across our shoulders instead of the soft shawl they crave for.

'Why!' Mrs. Ismey exclaimed, almost with a touch of irritability. 'Because I will never give Carrie away to any one who hates her. Surely you can understand that.'

She had spoken almost sharply, and apparently recognised that she had, for she added:

'She likes you, and you have told me you like her.'

'I think I do,' Felix said. 'In a way. But——'

'Yes, you will say, Is that a reason for my being so frank with you? Perhaps it isn't. Perhaps nothing would be a sufficient reason. Well, listen to the honest truth. I couldn't go on any more without telling some one. I couldn't tell my husband. I couldn't tell a woman, for I wouldn't trust any woman on earth with a secret.'

'Why not?'

'Because I wouldn't. So I told you. And now, I believe, you despise me for——'

Her eyes were again full of tears. Seeing them, Felix's last scruple was swept away.

'I could never despise you,' he said quickly. 'I, despise you! How can you say such things? You make me ashamed.'

He looked at her in a way that seemed almost to startle her, and they were both silent for a moment. During that moment the spirit of youth, of joy, dawned in her again. Despite her strange passion of tears, her nervous irritability, happiness was certainly hovering about her heart to-day.

'Don't let us talk of it any more,' she said. 'Perhaps I ought not to tell any one. You have more sense of honour than I. But then you are a man. Don't think ill of me. Perhaps this Paris trip will put everything right. If it does I will never speak about this craze of Carrie's again. It will be cured, and we will forget it. But one thing I shall never forget, your darling kindness and goodness to me.'

Felix blushed.

'Oh, that's nothing,' he said hurriedly. 'Please don't.'

'But it is a great deal. You got my telegram. I wired directly I could.'

'Yes. It was good of you. But, I say——'

'Well? What is it?'

'You know you forgot to put my name in the address.'

She looked astonished.

'I didn't. Why, if I had you could never have got the telegram.'

'My Christian name, I mean.'

'Did I? But——' She looked at him. 'Your mother opened it!'

'Yes.'

'What did she say?'

'Nothing—then.'

'But afterwards?'

'Very little. I dare say she was astonished.'

He was looking at her with a sort of nervous, hot question in his eyes.

'You see you telegraphed so—so kindly.'

'I telegraphed just as I felt. I was a fool to be so truthful. D'you know, Felix, I sometimes think that a woman who tells the truth is fit only for a madhouse. It's all very well for men. People expect truth from men. From women they don't. And if you give people what they don't expect from you they nearly always hate you.'

She had called him Felix. His mind was more fixed on that word than on the rest of her sentence. Yet she had spoken his name so lightly, with such a careless sort of familiarity, that he was not sure whether she even knew that she had spoken it. If she had said it unconsciously perhaps the tribute was the greater, the sense of familiarity shown more deep, worth more to him. He had no time to wonder, for just then the drawing-room door opened, and Mrs. Ismey's maid, Alice, came in.

She wore a black felt hat and a black jacket. When she saw Felix in the room she stopped by the door, and said:

'I beg pardon, ma'am. I thought you were alone.'

'Never mind,' said Mrs. Ismey. 'Mr. Wilding will forgive you.'

She glanced at Felix.

'Of course!' he said.

He looked at Alice as she came forward very quietly and gave a note to her mistress. The maid interested him. There was something striking in her personality. Even her softness and silence made a strong impression. Mrs. Ismey took the note.

'Wait a minute while I read it, Alice,' she said. 'You'll let me, won't you?'

She looked at Felix.

'Oh, please read it,' he said.

She tore it open. Alice stood waiting with her hands folded. She gazed at the carpet. Felix wondered very much what she was thinking about. It struck him afterwards that he had seldom wondered what a servant was thinking about before. When Mrs. Ismey had finished the note she looked radiant.

'We are going to-morrow!' she said.

'To——' Felix began.

He stopped abruptly. Perhaps Alice did not know about the Paris trip.

'Paris—yes,' said Mrs. Ismey. 'D' you hear, Alice, to-morrow morning by the ten train. You haven't much time.'

'I can manage easily, ma'am.'

'Very well. That will do.'

The maid seemed to Felix to hesitate for a moment. She stole a glance at him, and an odd idea came into his mind that she wanted to say something to him. Then she went out of the room rather slowly.

'I ought to go,' he said. 'You must have a lot to do.'

'Yes.'

She had got up, and as he came to her to say good-bye the intense brilliancy of her appearance, caused by the animation in her eyes chiefly, but also by the suggestion of readiness for activity in her pose, made an impression on him that was startling.

'You are happy!' he said.

'Yes,' she answered, giving him her beautiful hand. 'Happy, happy! Paris seems to me to-night to be the promised city, as Palestine was the promised land. It 's absurd, isn't it? But you—you know the reason.'

The pressure of her hand seemed to sting him.

'Come back on Saturday,' he said.

Suddenly he saw London an empty city, with streets full of hollow echoes, deserted houses, sad squares like roofless sepulchres.

'Do come back then.'

She only smiled, but there were light and fire in the smile. As Felix came out of the room, and was just going to descend the stairs, he saw the black figure of Alice. She was on the landing above him, and was looking over. He thought she was there for him. But how could that possibly be? Almost at once Mrs. Ismey followed him out of the drawing-room. Alice disappeared silently.

'Thank you, thank you, thank you!' Mrs. Ismey said.

She took his hand again, pressed it almost feverishly, and began to go quickly upstairs as Felix went down. When he was in the hall he heard her voice call:

'Good-bye!'

He looked up and saw her head. It was thrust forward over the banisters. She made her odd, animal face at him and vanished.

CHAPTER XXII

LADY CAROLINE did not forget that she had invited Felix for Tuesday. She wrote him a blunt little note saying that she was 'off to Paris,' and that she was sure he wouldn't break his heart over the disappointment. 'Besides, who knows whether you meant to come?' she concluded abruptly. One thing in the note surprised Felix. She said, 'I expect we shall be away for a fortnight.' Evidently, then, Mrs. Ismey had not yet told her friend that she was obliged to come back on the Saturday. When Felix had finished reading the note he laid it beside one of Mrs. Ismey's and examined the two calligraphies with a profound interest. They brought again to his mind the canon played on the two pianos. Lady Caroline's handwriting was large and bold. It sloped slightly upwards. Each word was perfectly clear and looked manly. There was not a blot or smudge on the envelope. How strangely deceiving are the very things by which people are inclined to judge character. Felix stared at the strong handwriting, and knew it was formed by the hand of a woman in the core of whose nature lurked a fatal weakness; at the feeble, straggling, blotted letters, and knew they were set down on that smudged and crumpled paper by a woman of strength and eager purpose, full of the desire to save, full of the bravery of self-sacrifice. These things, which men call signs, symptoms of the condition of a character, the state of a soul, are then merely lies? They are not only inexpressive of truth, but are actually expressive, apparently, of truth's opposite.

He put the two notes away in a drawer. And again he was assailed by an overwhelming sense of the confusion of life.

That week, for the first time since he had been in London, he wrote to the tailor. The letter was a long one, and very frank as a self-revelation. Felix indeed treated the tailor rather as over-burdened hearts often treat the void, confessed to him comfortably through the grille of space. This little old man of a different nation, companion of the trees, the plants, the sylvan voices of France, unseen and far away in his quiet hermitage,

had given an impulse to the English youth, was now the confidant of the results proceeding from that fierce gift. The letter was vigorous and sad, for, in the writing, a curious enthusiasm took possession of Felix, mysterious to him and edged with the gloom of city shadows. Trying to set down London on paper woke up his mind to a knowledge of what London's impression upon him had been. There was—he knew it as he wrote—a great melancholy in its excitement, like the murmur in the heart of a sunlit sea. But there was a joy in it, too, not to be found elsewhere, the joy that men find in everything that interests them deeply, that demands investigation and whispers, 'I have my secret.'

It was far easier for Felix to write to the tailor than to his mother. He did not pause to wonder why.

He anticipated the arrival of Saturday with eagerness. Already he had become so accustomed to the companionship of Mrs. Ismey, that her absence from London made a startling difference in his life. He realised this thoroughly the very day she went. Although he did not see her go, her face at the window of the gliding train, he knew she had gone as if all London told him. There was a difference, an emptiness. The edge of things was blunted for him, and he felt dull, and much stupider than usual, as if his intellect depended upon her and was hobbling, deprived of a necessary support. He was angry with himself for feeling this, but as the days went by the sensation increased. Each morning, when he came into his little room for breakfast, he looked anxiously for a letter from Paris, and when he did not find one was painfully disappointed, painfully disinclined to face the incidents of the day. Friday came and he had had no letter. Evidently she would not write at all. On Sunday he would see her and reproach her. Yes, he would certainly reproach her. After all that had occurred—her revelation of the reason for this Paris expedition, the money transaction, the incident of the telegram—she might have written to him once. She owed him at least a word, and her silence was cruel. Sometimes he made excuses for her. He told himself that she had been too much occupied with the bitter problem of Lady Caroline's rescue to spare a moment to him. But he always returned to his indignation. She might have written if she had cared to.

On Saturday he found upon the breakfast-table a big envelope sealed, and directed to him in Mrs. Ismey's illegible and irregular handwriting. He tore it open eagerly. A second envelope fell out. It was unstamped, and was directed to Mr. Ismey at an address in Rome. Felix looked at it in astonish-

ment. Why should she send it to him? Was it a mistake? He thrust his hand into the first envelope, pulled out some sheets of thin foreign paper, and began to read them. But the business was a difficult one. Mrs. Ismey had apparently written with a quill pen, and in a tremendous hurry. The letter was an illegible, blotted scrawl, almost impossible to decipher. Even after he had pored over it for half an hour there were words, even sentences, that Felix could not make out. It was written, too, all over the place. There were scraps in the corners of one sheet which required other scraps to make them intelligible. But these other scraps, ends of sentences only begun, Felix could not always find. He had never before seen a letter that was such a chaos. The ink had soaked through the flimsy paper so that the words of one side of a sheet were, as it seemed, reflected mistily among the words of the sheet's other side. The attempt to make the chaos coherent was a maddening task. Only his intense eagerness to be in communication with Mrs. Ismey, to know everything she had in Paris wished him to know in London, induced him to persevere in the effort to comprehend. When he had at length come at the greater part of her meaning, bitter disappointment overwhelmed him. She was not coming back that day. On Sunday she would not be in Green Street. Lady Caroline had been right. They were to spend a fortnight in Paris. Mrs. Ismey gave a strong reason for this change of plan, and also for a task, horribly repugnant to him, which she confided to Felix with a string of apologies and regrets. The cure of Lady Caroline, she wrote, was trembling in the balance owing to her friend's disinclination to be snatched from the grip of the vice she loved. It was a battle between the will of the doctor and the will of the patient. Lady Caroline had been so far yielding that she had allowed the doctor to see what he could do. She had permitted Mrs. Ismey to put her into his hands. But she could not be induced to make a deliberate effort to submit to his influence. On the contrary she resisted it violently with all her force. Mrs. Ismey said that she could not write an account of all that was going on, but Felix would understand what a miserable condition of anxiety she was in, at one moment on the verge of hope, at another inclined to despair. Nothing but her determination to save her friend from utter physical and mental ruin would induce her to descend to the subterfuge which was necessary, if she was to remain longer in Paris and give Lady Caroline a last chance. And then came the request before which Felix felt everything that was decent in him flinching. She asked him to stamp the

letter to her husband, which she enclosed, and to post it for her in the district to which Green Street belonged. She ended with messages which made the boy's cheeks burn, assuring him that she looked upon him as her only friend and protector, that she confided utterly in him, that she knew how he would hate doing what she asked, but that she dared to ask him since he alone knew the reason of the odious deception which she was forced to lend herself to and involve him in.

'I know how you will loathe doing it,' she wrote, 'but just think how far worse it is for me. I tell a lie to the man who believes in me. My whole nature revolts from doing it. And yet, when I look at Carrie, I cannot hesitate. Nor could you if you were here, if you could know, could see all that is going on. Over and over again I have thought of throwing it all up, of coming straight back to London and cutting myself once and for ever adrift from Carrie and all the horrors of her life. But then something steps in, something stronger than I am, and prevents me. Call it love, folly, friendship, what you like, I can't resist it. I feel that I could ruin myself to save her. Don't think me mad. Pity me. Help me. Something in my heart tells me that you will. If you don't—well, then Carrie is lost. For there is no one I can trust but you, and if you fail me I must come back. And if I leave her here in Paris, which is the very paradise of the *morphinomanes*, she will simply go under for ever. You 'll say that I might bring her back. Yes, but uncured? I 'm in an *impasse*. Help me!'

The letter was almost hysterical. What could be going on in Paris? Felix felt inclined to travel there that day and bring Mrs. Ismey home. He hated to think of her exposed to strange and terrible circumstances such as she hinted at. His imagination could not tell him what they were. He was in the dark, but the mere look of her letter now seemed to make him realise at least something of the confusion and misery of her present existence. Then he thought of Lady Caroline. What a traitor to truth her appearance was. That expression of power was a lie, that dominant pose a lie, that autocratic glance a lie. Only the weariness, the occasional indifference to outward things, the moody silences, the stony gravities of her told something of the truth of her body and of her soul. A slow jealousy of her began to stir in him. For was she not tearing Mrs. Ismey's life to pieces? For the first time he woke to a consciousness of the many Molochs of the world, those who demand and obtain human sacrifices. Lady Caroline was one. And he understood, or began to understand, the terrible fact, which can also be so

magnificent, that each human life is like an organ set in a body, and affecting, in its disease, the whole body. Just then the mysterious and ordained dependence of the human being upon the human beings surrounding it shocked and almost terrified him.

He looked at the envelope addressed to Mr. Ismey which was lying on the table. Lady Caroline's disease, spreading, eating its slow way through invisible tissues, reached that man in Rome and reached him, Felix, sitting in his little room in London. He took up the letter and mechanically weighed it in his hand. What could it contain? Lies. That was certain and inevitable. If, under these circumstances, Mrs. Ismey wrote to her husband, she could only write lies to him, lies describing her supposed life in London, the supposed doings of London days. It was too degrading. His hand felt hot with shame as it held the letter. And was he to put the necessary finishing touch to the low plot by posting it? He was so young, and had been brought up in an atmosphere so singularly truthful that such an act revolted him, created within him a species of nausea of the soul. The white refinement of his youth, of whose cleanness and sensitive delicacy he was generally quite unaware and, when he became faintly aware of them—as, for instance, when a girl's soft voice called Nino, and guilt shone in his face—was unable to understand, trembled and shrank away from the little and very simple deed that was required of him as if it were a great crime. The idea, old-fashioned, worthy of his mother cradled in the simplicity of country life, came to him that he had eaten Mr. Ismey's bread and salt and was now to betray him. He said to himself that he could not do it, that he would not do it, and he took the letter, locked it up in a drawer, and sent a telegram to Paris:

'Do not ask me to do that come back at once much better Felix.'

He put his Christian name without thought that he was putting it. To do so was natural. She had signed her blotted letter, Valeria. That morning he spent at Sam's school in a turmoil of excitement which he only controlled with difficulty. It seemed to him as if the pupils must see what was passing in his mind, almost as if they, too, must be involved in the circumstances which were at the same time oppressing and stinging him. The gaiety of Arliss, the airy and satirical gravities of Harry Cleave, Singleton's vague worldliness, even the desperate determination of Paul Chalmers, and the smiling

calm of Sam surprised him again and again. Yet why should they be different because he was? He rather hated them because they were not.

In the afternoon he left early and hurried home, expecting to find a telegram. There was one lying on his table. He tore it open.

'For God's sake post it you would if you knew all post it post it Valeria.'

As he was standing with the thin paper in his hand there was a knock at the door, and his man came in.

'Another telegram for you, sir,' he said.

'Thanks,' said Felix quietly, holding out his hand for it.

'Post it my dear boy if you have the faintest friendship for me everything depends on it for God's sake do this one thing for me I will never forget it love Valeria.'

There was something very vital in these two cries from Paris. As Felix looked at them he seemed to hear Mrs. Ismey's voice uttering them, to see her face as he had seen it in the cab that night before she told him to look away. He went to the drawer in which he had locked the letter to Mr. Ismey and took it out slowly. He meant to post it now. He knew quite well that he was going to post it. But when he saw the letter he reddened, standing there by himself. There was a pricking in his skin. He was thankful no one was in the room to look at him. And then, immediately, he was profoundly thankful for something else, thankful that he had not entered the office of Ismey and Co. If he had he could never surely have posted this letter. It seemed almost as if Mrs. Ismey had foreseen that these circumstances were going to arise when she asked him to give up the career her husband had offered him. He remembered that she had never yet told him why she had required that sacrifice of him. Since he had joined the school, seen another career before him, felt firm ground beneath his feet, he had been less anxious to know her reason. New interests had blotted out the old anxiety. But now again he longed to know. Had she—could she have had—some intuition of the turn that things would take?

She was very clever. Once she had advised him to guard against too great cleverness. She had spoken of it as if it were an evil thing. He began to see her meaning. But she, if she indeed showed a shrewdness that seemed perhaps opposed to

honour, was after all exerting herself with an unselfish aim that made for nobility. He thought of that moment when she had shut her eyes, and spoken of going forward blindly, regardless of consequences. Was it easier for a woman to do that than for a man? Perhaps. As he went out to post the letter to Mr. Ismey, when he stood before the box in Green Street and posted it, Felix felt that he too had shut his eyes and was in darkness, a darkness that might be felt.

That evening a third telegram arrived from Paris: 'Have you posted it Valeria.' The answer was paid. Felix wired back: 'Yes Felix.'

On Monday he received a second long and frightfully illegible letter from Mrs. Ismey, imploring his forgiveness for having dared to ask such a sacrifice from him, and thanking him again and again in almost frantic terms for having posted the letter. She entered at length into the moral aspect of the question, and quite amazed Felix by the accuracy with which, in Paris, she had divined the workings of his mind in London. Her power of thought-reading, which had surprised and, while it confused him, had delighted him from the first moment of his acquaintance with her, did not desert her in this complicated phase of her existence. Indeed, she seemed more startlingly intuitive now than ever before, as if her troubles whipped up her intellect. He replied to her letter at length, acknowledging that all she had thought had been right, and urging her to come home. While he wrote the slow jealousy of Lady Caroline, which he had already felt but dimly, grew in his heart and seemed almost to guide his pen. Why should she be allowed to wreck the life of another for the gratification of a hateful passion? It was cruelly, foully unjust, he thought. But what a strong, shining sense of friendship and its duties Mrs. Ismey must have. He saw Lady Caroline, while he wrote, black; Mrs. Ismey white like an angel, and then grey like an angel dragged in the dirt. For there are surely acts that cannot be done for whatever cause without leaving a stain upon the doer of them.

The reply to his letter was another enclosure for Mr. Ismey in Rome, with endless excuses and apologies. Felix posted it, as he had posted the first. He felt that it would be absurd, having sinned once, to refuse to repeat his sin. Yet he rebelled even more violently this time than he had before, so violently, indeed, that he wrote to Mrs. Ismey refusing to be the medium of any more deception. The letter was masterful in tone. He had never dared to assume such autocracy towards her in their previous relations. But now he was driven by a feeling of

shame and personal degradation. His heart was hot within him, and he wrote ere the kindled fire had time to die down. When the letter had gone he thought it over and was afraid. Perhaps she would never speak to him again. Perhaps he was a fool to be governed by such feelings. He knew he had a tendency towards exaggeration. Did he exaggerate now? He looked mentally at Mr. Ismey's position, at his own, at the intercourse which had taken place between them, the kindnesses which now jangled about him like chains. No, he had not exaggerated. He felt that if he had to write to Mrs. Ismey again now he would write the same letter. His feelings stood. But he had a great fear that she would hate him. And if she hated him it seemed to him that his world would crumble about his feet. For even what he had done for her, and the anger he felt against himself for having done it, seemed to draw him towards her, to strengthen the strands of their friendship.

She did not answer his letter, but two days afterwards she returned from Paris. She had been away just thirteen days. Almost directly she arrived she sent a brief note to Felix asking him to come and see her. When he read it and knew that she was in Green Street, close to him, that he had only to take a cab and he would be actually with her in a few minutes, he felt almost bewildered. How would she greet him? Her note gave no indication of her feelings towards him. It was signed V. I. He turned it over in his hand, threw it down, and started for Green Street.

He fancied that the man-servant who let him in looked at him curiously, and that a faint smile dawned for a moment on his usually well-governed lips. Did he know of all that had been happening? Of course not. And yet, as Felix mounted the stairs, the horrible idea came to him for the first time that Mrs. Ismey was to a certain extent in the power of this man, of all her servants. There was not one in her household who did not know what her husband was not to know, that she had been absent from home while he had been away. How abominable that was.

When he came into the drawing-room Mrs. Ismey was there, lying down on a sofa in a shadowy corner. Only one electric light was burning on the piano. Felix had never before seen the room so dark. As the man-servant went out he came up to the sofa nervously. She remained lying down. She had on a red dress. He supposed it was a tea-gown. It was long and flowing and did not define the figure, and he thought that kind

of dress, so loosely made, gave to the wearer of it the look of an invalid. Pillows were banked up behind her head. Even when he came close to her he could not see her with real distinctness. The room was too dark. Some strong perfume floated about her. It was delicious but almost stifling.

'You see I have obeyed,' she said, holding out her hand.

He took it, and sat down on a low chair beside the sofa.

'Obeyed?' he asked. 'But—what do you mean?'

'I have come back.'

Her voice sounded thin and exhausted. There was no resonance in its timbre. It was husky.

'Yes, but——'

'Well, didn't you tell me to come back? Have you forgotten that letter you wrote already?'

He looked more closely into her face to see whether she was angry. He could not tell by her voice. That only sounded tired, thoroughly tired out.

'But weren't you coming?' he asked. 'Weren't you coming anyhow?'

Even her face did not tell him what he wished to know. Something—the shadow on it, perhaps, or the way her hair was done, more loosely, more untidily than usual—made it look haggard and drawn and old. Yet there was colour in her cheeks, colour that was feverish, he thought, almost artificial in its brightness.

'No. But for your letter I should have stayed on, I should have struggled on to the bitter end, till I had to come back to meet Francis.'

'But then she—Lady Caroline isn't——'

He hardly liked to speak of her, and brought out the words falteringly as if he were speaking of a great criminal.

'I don't know. I don't believe so. And now I hardly seem to care. Your letter was very cruel, but it made me look the truth in the face and feel ashamed. You are right. I ought never to have gone. I ought never to have put my friend before my husband. But I was carried away. You don't know—no man can ever know—how we women are the slaves of our affections. No man is. A man can always stop and think a thing out. But we pay, we pay!'

She moved restlessly on the sofa, with a peculiar, abrupt restlessness almost as marked and odd as that of a child. It seemed to indicate not merely a mind, but also a body intensely ill at ease.

'I say, you aren't ill, are you?' Felix said abruptly.

'Ill? No! What makes you think so?'

She turned as if to approach her face to his, but then checked herself and drew a little further away.

'I don't know. I 'm glad you aren't.'

'I 'm not ill, that is, I haven't caught anything,' she went on, with a little bitter laugh. 'But you can hardly expect me to feel robust after all I 've been through. I 'm not made of iron.'

Her words, and the way she spoke them, made him feel suddenly that he had been as cruel as if he had struck her.

'Oh do, please, forgive me,' he exclaimed.

He put out his hand nervously, yet impulsively, and laid it on the edge of the sofa just touching her dress.

'It is good of you to take any notice of my letter and not to be angry with me. After it had gone I was awfully afraid. I thought—I didn't know—I thought perhaps you 'd never speak to me again.'

'And if I hadn't?'

He did not answer.

'Would you have cared?'

After a silence she heard him say, in an odd, cold voice:

'Yes.'

His face was hot, his whole body was hot when he said that. He was very glad now that the room was so dark. She said nothing, but again moved on her pillows, ungovernably, as if she had felt something run over her. When she was still, he said:

'I couldn't go on with it, I simply couldn't. So I had to tell you. I wrote rather in a hurry. I 'm afraid perhaps I put it rudely.'

'You just put the truth and it looked just what it was—ugly. It 's the first time I 've ever acted such a hideous lie, and it shall be the last. But sometimes—d' you know sometimes I think that even my moral sense will be sapped, is sapped already by all I have had to see and know.'

She turned towards him now, lifted herself up, and rested her cheek on her hand, supporting herself on her elbow.

'If you knew all I think you would forgive me,' she said.

'But I—there 's nothing for me to forgive. And besides you did it from the noblest motive.'

'Yes, the motive was good. After all, Carrie has been a friend to me in many ways.'

After a little pause, during which she kept her eyes on him as if she were considering narrowly whether to say something to him or not, she went on, in a voice which suddenly sounded less tired:

'You have no idea how morphia dominates her. Till I went with her to Paris even I did not know.'

'But tell me something about it. What do they do?'

He thought her face looked brighter in the shadow, and guessed that the idea of being able to speak frankly to some one was a relief to her mind.

'It's extraordinary,' she exclaimed, with something like vivacity. 'You will hardly believe it if I tell you. But this morphia craze is spread secretly all through modern society. Dozens of well-known London women could no more get on without their *piqure* than you and I without our cigarette or our cup of tea. And in Paris it's ten times worse.'

'I've seen things about it sometimes in the papers,' said Felix.

'The morphia habit is far more prevalent even than they say. Apparently people begin to inject either because they're bored or miserable, or because they feel over-tired, or out of sheer curiosity. Carrie confessed to me that she did it simply to know what the feeling was like, whether she would have delicious dreams. She wanted to experience what the German doctors call *Euphorie*.'

'What's that exactly?' asked Felix, deeply interested.

'*Bien-être*. We all want to experience that, don't we?' Again she made a violent movement. A sort of shudder ran through her body.

'Yes, I suppose so. But when she began did she have dreams? Was she happy?'

'Surely the far door is open,' Mrs. Ismey said.

Felix was surprised by the abruptness of the remark.

'I don't think so.'

'I seem to feel a draught. Just go and see, will you?'

Felix got up, traversed the long room and turned the corner into the second drawing-room. The door was shut. He came back.

'No, it isn't open,' he said.

'How odd. I certainly felt a draught. I'm so sorry.'

'Was that why you shivered?'

'Did I shiver?' she said.

There was a sort of exquisitely contented surprise in her voice.

'But surely you knew you did?' he said.

'No. I'm quite warm now. It's comfy in here, isn't it? Just you and I together.'

Felix was infected by the lazy serenity with which she spoke. He looked round the room. It was deliciously pretty in the

faint light. In the distance the fire danced, lighting up the soft, warm hues of the wood with which the walls were lined, the shot silk above it. The heavy, pale-yellow curtains shut out London, the dark streets, the cold. He looked at her as she lay back on the great sofa against the pile of cushions and wondered why, when he came in, he had thought she looked old. There must have been some odd, disfiguring shadow across her face, for now it seemed to him quite childish. Yes, it was like the face of a happy child.

'Yes, it's splendid being here with you,' he said, drawing a little closer to her without knowing he did so. '*Bien-être* for me.'

'*Euphorie, bien-être,*' she said, with a sort of almost drowsy, joyous languor. 'We all seek that here in the world in our different ways. Poor old Carrie sought it in that way, through the *piqure.*'

'And did she have it?'

'Oh yes. Carrie has had intense pleasure. She's often described it to me. The first time she made a *piqure* she injected a demi-centigramme.'

Mrs. Ismey lifted up her arms and clasped her hands on the cushions under her head.

'They say that as a rule after the first injection people suffer, that they only begin to feel the *Euphorie* after several injections. But Carrie felt it after the very first.'

'What was it like exactly? Did she tell you?'

The faint light, the strong perfume that floated round Mrs. Ismey, and this conversation, with its mingling of horror and unnatural happiness, woke up all the imagination, all the curiosity, even much of the poetry in Felix.

'She felt an exquisite languor, she told me, as if she lay in a world all flooded with gold into which sorrow had never entered. Just to lie still in such a world was Paradise, and she wanted to lie there without making a movement or uttering a sound through all eternity. That was her *Euphorie*, endless repose with endless, calm consciousness. Activities seemed ridiculous. And so they are. She had untroubled peace.'

'And did it last long?'

'For some hours at first.'

'But now——'

'Oh now, it's quite different. A demi-centigramme would have no effect on her at all. I should think not!'

She laughed, and her laugh sounded almost joyous.

'D'you know where I found her one day in Paris?' she said.

'No. Where?'

'In the house of a *morphineuse*.'

'A *morphineuse*?'

'Yes. You have no idea what a rage for morphia there is in Paris. I didn't know till I went there this time with Carrie.'

'But didn't you go because she could be cured in Paris?'

'Yes, of course. Barreille, the man for that sort of thing, practises there. But he practises in Paris because Paris is the centre of the cult.'

'How horrible!' said Felix. 'A cult for morphia!'

'Yes, isn't it. Everything that can tempt the *morphinomane* is to be found in Paris. The *morphineuse* is an old woman who makes a profession of injecting morphia into the smart women and the *demi-mondaines* who frequent her house. These *morphineuses* are, some of them, very rich. The one Carrie went to is.'

'But how did you find out she had gone? Did she tell you?'

'No. If she had I should never have let her go. I found it out through Alice.'

'Your maid!' said Felix, thinking of the quiet girl with the emotional face whom he had seen twice. 'Then she knows.'

'She has to know. One day I was obliged to go out to the dressmaker. I left Alice with Carrie. Barreille told me Carrie was not to be left alone just then. He had seen her once. While I was at the dressmaker's Alice arrived. She was in a fearful state. She told me Carrie had insisted on leaving the hotel directly I had gone. Alice accompanied her. They drove to the house of this *morphineuse*, and Carrie went in leaving Alice in the coupé. Then Alice came to fetch me.'

'And you went?'

'At once.'

The languor was going out of Mrs. Ismey's voice. She began to speak with animation, as if her story excited her.

'We drove into a quarter of Paris I had never seen, a horrible, dreary quarter beyond Montmartre, and came into a dreadful-looking street—Alice had taken the address down—and stopped before a court. Then we got out, walked into the court and down a narrow, dark passage open to the air, and came to a mean, little door. It was all very mysterious and frightening, but it was exciting too. You can understand that?'

'Rather!' said Felix.

'There was a cord hanging beside the door. "We have to pull that, ma'am," Alice said. I pulled it and heard a bell

ring inside the house. After a minute or two the door was opened by a woman. She had a complexion just like Carrie's, and a black dress. No cap. She didn't look like a servant, but more like a woman who shows you to your seat in a theatre. "What do you want?" she said. I told her I wished to come in. "Where's your *billet d'entrée?*" Of course I hadn't one, and I was obliged to say so. She refused to let us in.'

'What did you do?' asked Felix eagerly. 'Weren't you afraid?'

He felt passionately interested.

'No, not afraid. By that time I felt I could face anything to get Carrie away. I was determined to get in. I took out my purse. "No, no," the woman said. "If madame has no *billet d'entrée* madame cannot enter." "Do you think I am a police-agent?" I asked. "Madame cannot enter!" repeated the woman. She began to close the door, but I put in my foot——'

'You are plucky!' said Felix with enthusiasm.

He looked at her almost with amazement. It seemed wonderful to him that the woman who lay there against the pile of cushions, with her hands clasped behind her shining hair, and all the thousand pretty things of her home about her, could show such determination, could penetrate into the squalor of a low den of Paris, fearless of danger, heedless of the possible horrors it concealed.

'Well, how could I leave Carrie there?' she said carelessly.

'And you got in?'

'Yes. But I had to act a part.'

'What part?'

'I had to pretend that Alice and I were clients as they call them, that we had come to have injections.'

'You! How atrocious!'

'It was the only way. I said I had a friend there. I gave Carrie's name, and Alice told the woman that she had left Carrie there. The woman went away, and after a few minutes came back and let us in. We went up a lot of steep stairs. They were very dark. Presently we got into a corridor. Alice was awfully frightened, but I didn't care a bit. I was too interested to see what it would be like. At the end of the corridor there was a big, hideous room. This was what they call the *salle de réception.* D'you know, it was like a sort of dream there. This huge room was only lit by a great fire, a great red fire burning at one end. There were heavy curtains

over the windows, and the only furniture was a number of broad divans ranged all along the walls, which were covered with some dingy paper with a horrid-looking pattern—snakes, or leaves or something—I couldn't see properly. Quantities of great cushions were scattered over these divans, and on them were sitting and lying women—the *morphinomanes*. There must have been eight or nine of them. Of course they were all different, and yet, in a way, they were all alike. They were all alike because they were all waiting to have the morphia put into them.'

'How disgusting!' exclaimed Felix.

'They were sitting or lying there almost like dead people, staring at each other in the firelight with hollow, expressionless eyes. Such eyes! They seemed to be looking out of caverns at something a very long way off. Two or three of these women were trembling, almost as if they had convulsions. One kept on opening and shutting her two hands as if she were keeping time to music. Another was holding an unlit cigarette between her teeth and stretching out her arms. There was a girl in one corner crying dreadfully, almost howling. She terrified Alice.'

'And you?'

'No, I wasn't a bit terrified.'

She spoke almost gaily, and with a sort of light-hearted excitement.

'I wonder you weren't,' Felix said, with an earnestness of surprise that seemed to strike her.

'Of course I hated it,' she said. 'But it wouldn't be true to say I was frightened. Once I saw the howling dervishes at Cairo. Well, I felt just like when I saw them—as if it were a sort of dreadful show.'

'I see.'

He began to understand.

'I believe you would have felt the same,' she added.

'I dare say I should.'

'There was one woman who was beautifully dressed, a real *mondaine* of Paris. She had torn open all the front of her gown and—but I can't tell you everything.'

'No, no,' said Felix quickly. 'And Lady Caroline?'

'She was there, sitting by quite an old woman with white hair. I went up to her. Alice wouldn't stir from the door. She lost her head. I went to Carrie and asked her to come away. I begged and prayed her to come. She wouldn't. The other women took no notice of us. They were all looking

towards one side of the room where there was a door partly covered with a curtain. I found out afterwards that this door led into the room of the *morphineuse*. I made quite a scene with Carrie, but it was all no use. She only pushed me away, when I stood in front of her, and said, "Let me see the door, will you?" At last I was in despair, and I went back towards Alice. I don't quite know what I meant to do. I think I meant to make Alice try if she could persuade Carrie. But there was no time, for just then the door of the *morphineuse* opened.'

Mrs. Ismey paused. Felix could see that her eyes were gleaming with excitement. As she went on with her story her vivacity of manner had increased. She was sitting almost upright against the cushions, and pressing them with her two hands.

'A lot of light shone in all over the room, and a woman came towards us. Oh, Felix, she looked so happy! Perhaps it was the contrast between her and all the other women that—no, it wasn't, though—anywhere you would have been struck by her. She walked as if she was on air, so easily and lightly, and she looked as young as a schoolgirl. Her lips were bright red, and her eyes were shining. But I had hardly time to see her, for all the women sprang up from the divans like mad creatures, and rushed towards the *morphineuse*, who came to the threshold of the room just then. They were all screaming to her to let them come in next. They cried out, "It's my turn! It's my turn!" They even pushed against each other, and tried to drag each other away so as to be first.'

'Not Lady Caroline surely!' said Felix, scarcely able to believe that she was speaking the truth.

'Yes, Carrie was one of the most violent.'

'And the *morphineuse*—what was she like?'

'She was a wrinkled old woman. She had a lamp in her hand and a dirty shawl wrapped round her, and she stood there looking after the woman who had just come out with a smile, as if she was pleased at the result of what she had done.'

'Old beast!' muttered Felix, under his breath.

'She didn't take the slightest notice of all the screaming, hustling women at first, but when she did she chose Carrie.'

'And you couldn't do anything?'

'I tried to. But if you had seen those women! They were ready to tear each other to pieces. I was frightened at last, and I ran back to Alice. As the door of the *morphineuse* shut

I heard Carrie saying, "Three *piqures*, Madame Virginie, three *piqures*. You know you——' and that was all. I went down to the coupé and waited there. And Carrie came at last.'

There was a long silence between them. Mrs. Ismey lay back again. Her face was turned towards Felix.

'It's just like a nightmare,' he said at length. 'If any one but you——'

'You wouldn't believe it?'

'I don't think I could. It seems so impossible that—that women who are ladies could ever be like that, unless they were really mad. And they aren't mad. Why, I suppose if I were to meet any of those women away from the *morphineuse* I should never guess there was anything the matter with them.'

'Probably not.'

'Why do you smile?'

'I smile!' she said. 'What do you mean? I didn't smile.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon. It must have been the flicker of the fire.'

'Yes. I am not inclined to smile over such horrors.'

She sighed heavily.

'And Lady Caroline has come back with you?'

'Yes. Barreille seems to have done her some good. She has diminished the amount she injects. But it won't last. The only real chance for her would be to be shut up. And she'll never consent to that. Bareille told me she ought to go into one of those homes. There are several. There's one at Charenton and another at Ivry-sur-Seine. He told me all about the treatment. It was very interesting.'

Felix had just been thinking how deeply interested she evidently was in the horrible subject they were discussing. But he understood her interest, for he shared it. Everything that dominates has some fascination. He said so to her now, moved, he did not know why, to explain her attitude of mind and his to themselves.

'That's exactly it,' she answered eagerly. 'It would be strange and almost unnatural if I were not interested in a thing that has taken absolute possession of a woman so strong as Carrie. She would sacrifice everything, love, honour, even a life I believe, to obtain a supply of morphia if she were without it. D'you know, if I were to try forcibly to keep her from it I am sure she would kill me in order to get it.'

'But then she is mad.'

'No. You could not get a doctor to say so. Besides, really, she isn't. You know she isn't.'

'She always seems to me clever and strong,' said Felix.

He was thinking of Lady Caroline as he had known her. It was almost incredible to him that she could turn into one of the furies at the house of the *morphineuse*.

'I shall never, never be able to read people,' he added, in a sort of almost despairing outburst. 'It does make life hateful all these hidden things. It is as if we were always wandering about in a London fog.'

'Ah, but some people let us understand them. Some people want to be understood. You shouldn't say that.'

By the way she spoke he knew she alluded to herself and him.

'Do you really like me to understand you?' he said, almost wistfully.

'You know I do. Haven't I confided in you?'

'Yes. That is true. And yet——'

'What more can I do?'

'There are things—will you let me ask you something?'

'Yes.'

'Why didn't you wish me to go into your husband's office?'

'I didn't mean to tell you, but you have done so much for me that I owe it to you now. It was an utterly selfish motive. I thought—I don't know why, for I scarcely knew you—but I thought some day I should want a friend, a friend who would be absolutely free to help me. I required help, and there was something about you, something good and straight and manly—I don't know. We women don't reason when we choose. We just see and choose. I chose you. Are you angry?'

'Angry!' he said.

He could not have spoken a second word at that moment. He clasped his hot hands tightly together on his knees.

'And because I chose you I wanted to keep you free. If you had been in my husband's office you would have been bound to him, to a certain extent. I felt your sense of honour. They say women haven't got any.'

'That isn't true,' he said quickly and almost hotly.

'I hope not. At any rate, honour or not, what I felt was that if you had accepted a sort of career at my husband's hands, you could never have taken Carrie's side if it came to a question of helping me for her—as you did with those letters. Oh, I'm a fool, I'm a fool, and perhaps I'm wicked. But I knew and loved Carrie before I ever saw my husband. It's abominable,

but I can't help putting her first sometimes, and all the more because he's as straight as a die and she's all wrong. One seems to owe more somehow to the sinner. You'll hate me.'

'Hate you!' he said.

As he spoke he had a feeling as if a flame went over his body seeking the way to his heart

It found the way.

now that he had become conscious of all he felt for Mrs. Ismey, any discussion between his mother and him with regard to the money would be intolerable. For this reason above all he longed to pay it back. He could not. And this fact kept him from going home. He said to himself that he could not endure to go home till the money was paid, till the score was clear. His mother would not speak of the matter, probably, but she would be thinking of it, wondering about it, remembering that telegram signed with Mrs. Ismey's Christian name. He grew hot at the thought. Already, perhaps, his mother was imagining, certainly she must be imagining all sorts of things about himself and Mrs. Ismey. That cursed telegram! It and its result seemed to vulgarise the great friendship which was doing so much for him. Again and again, in the light of his new knowledge of himself, Felix rehearsed that horrible little scene in the drawing-room of Hill House when Mrs. Wilding had warned him against women. Women! She must have meant Mrs. Ismey. And it was she, not he really, who had given Mrs. Ismey that money. He would be twenty-one in January. Then, if Mrs. Ismey had not returned it before, he could pay it back at once. But meanwhile——? Even if he saved out of his allowance it would be utterly impossible to get such a sum together before he came of age. He had to break his word to his mother. That was bad enough. But he had also to write and apologise for breaking it. He did so. While he wrote his cheeks burned, and he was conscious of a sensation of anger against his mother. The letter was brief, the allusion to the money very brief. He simply said he was 'most awfully sorry,' that he had felt absolutely certain of paying the money back on the Saturday, and that he hoped to do so almost at once. His mother's reply made him very much ashamed of that unreasonable sensation of anger. She wrote that the money was really his and that there was no necessity to think any more about it. She did not ask him when he was coming home. During these weeks before Christmas he began to notice that there was a great lack of vivacity in her letters. She wrote very often, generally three times a week, but she seemed to have little to say, and what she had to say was expressed without any vigour. The letters were tired letters without being actually sad. She alluded to the persistent blackness of the weather, said she could get out very little, that it was cold for driving, and so muddy in the lanes that it was very fatiguing to walk. She had a cough. Once when she wrote she had been in bed for two days. She thought she had caught a chill coming from church one Sunday afternoon.

Felix hoped she was not going to become a *malade imaginaire.* He urged her in his letters not to coddle herself, but to get out and take plenty of air and exercise. 'That's what you want,' he wrote. 'You wrap up far too much and shut yourself indoors. No one can feel strong if they lead an unwholesome life.' And as he wrote he wished he could give everybody plenty of common-sense. At such moments he knew he was so full of it. 'Don't be always on the sofa!' was another of his maxims for home consumption. 'There's nothing on earth so enervating as perpetually lying down on a sofa.'

When he went to call on Mrs. Ismey he nearly always found her stretched on the big sofa in the pretty room in Green Street. But that was quite different. The attitude suited her. Her shining hair looked deliciously alive against the pale cushions with their attenuated colours. Felix had only once seen her walking out of doors. She was not one of the athletic sisterhood. She never went to Prince's except now and then to sit at a tea-table and look on at the skaters. She never rode or danced, or in fact made any bodily exertion as far as he knew. It never occurred to him that she ought to, or that she was neglecting one, and an admirable side of life. He had always been accustomed to see her in a pretty room, surrounded by flowers, books, music, tea-cups. So, while he almost hotly advised his mother to take plenty of exercise in the raw air of the muddy country lanes round Hill House, he loved to find Mrs. Ismey reposing in her dimly lit drawing-room, which was always kept very warm and very scented.

One day she alluded to the money which had not been paid back. She had just been speaking of Lady Caroline, and of the terrible confusion into which those who took drugs always allowed their affairs to get. He guessed why, immediately afterwards, she thought of the cheque he had given her.

'I am so ashamed,' she said, 'about that money. Every day I have expected to give it you, and every day——'

She hesitated.

'Well, if I could tell you all I don't think you would blame me. I dare say you are surprised, seeing how we live, that I should be unable to find a hundred pounds, but——'

'Don't, don't explain!' he exclaimed. 'I understand perfectly.'

'No, but you ought to know more. It isn't fair. I feel sometimes as if I were a sort of cheat when you are sitting here, when you see all these flowers and new books. You must say to yourself: "If she liked she could pay me."'

'No, never.'

'Ah, but you are chivalrous, the most chivalrous man I ever met. The truth is, it is Francis who is rich, and—well, if I want money I have to explain why I want it. I can't tell lies easily. If I could I should have a much better time. I wanted that hundred pounds to do something he would never have consented to. As I wouldn't tell him a lie I couldn't ask him. But sometimes now I think there would have been less wickedness in telling a lie to Francis than in breaking a promise to you.'

Tears suddenly came into her eyes.

'I do hate to seem to play you false,' she said. 'It makes me feel so little and mean.'

'But you know I understand about the money. You must know that,' he said.

'I don't wish you to understand about it,' she said. 'I am very extravagant.'

He laughed. He knew so well she was playing a comedy of selfishness for his benefit to conceal her virtue which he adored. She could read him. He began to read her. It seemed to him that since the evening when they met after her return from Paris she was very much clearer to him. The flame in his heart lit up the places which had been so dark. She was less of an enigma than she had been, and, because he felt that, he was far more at ease with her. But he was not without anxieties on her account.

The boy dawning into a man among all the sensations in the armoury of the soul loves most the protective. Felix felt that since he was Mrs. Ismey's greatest friend and confidant he ought to protect her if, and when, she required protection; and he often felt, during those weeks between her return from Paris and Christmas, that she did require protection. Her readiness for self-sacrifice in regard to Lady Caroline was too great. In this friendship her impulsiveness broke all bounds.

Since he knew that he loved her he became more observant, not less, of her. That was absolutely characteristic of him. She noticed the change.

'You are always watching me,' she said to him one day, almost uneasily he thought.

He looked rather uncomfortable. It was quite true, but he had not meant that she should see it.

'Well,' she went on. 'You don't deny it!'

'I can't,' he said. 'Are you angry with me?'

'No. But why do you watch me? Is there anything odd about me?'

'Odd—how do you mean? You are not like other people.'

'Yes, I am.'

She really spoke with some irritation.

'Why, what difference is there between me and other women?' she went on.

'I think you are different in—oh, in ever so many ways.'

That was true. He did find her strange. Her moods altered rapidly and almost inexplicably. Sometimes he found her dull, weary, almost stupid, unable to be interested in anything, or to pursue any topic of conversation. She would lie on the sofa, while he sat by her, staring into vacancy with eyes devoid of expression. If she talked she glanced aimlessly from one subject to another. If he talked she would sometimes interrupt him with *mal-à-propos* remarks. Or she would repeat the same remark again and again, each time apparently quite unconscious that she had made it before. He guessed then that she was painfully preoccupied with Lady Caroline's condition; that her friend had startled or disgusted her by some fresh outbreak or vagary of a disordered mind. Once or twice he had asked her if it were not so, and she had been obliged to acknowledge the accuracy of his suspicions. But there were other moments when she was startlingly gay and brilliant, full of animal spirits and of almost rollicking merriment. She showed then extreme interest in every subject which they discussed. His slightest remark grasped her attention or appealed to her imagination. She was the most perfect listener in the world and, he thought, the most delightful talker, by turns. Any one who sat with her at such moments would have pronounced her an optimist of the most light-hearted type. She saw everything *en rose*, was confident that the sorrows of the world were only for the moment, that black would fade out of life, that everything which seemed crooked would be straight in the end. Even Felix could not go as far as she went into the regions of delicious certainty, of vivacious faith in the destiny of happiness which awaited the individual and the race. Then he knew that she had a hope of Lady Caroline's salvation. And her appearance altered in the same way, and almost as markedly as her moods. Sometimes she looked ill, faded. Her skin was dry and stretched. Her eyes seemed to Felix to be shrivelled in her head. They looked smaller than usual and fainter in colour. The fires in them were extinguished. There were tiny lines about them and about her mouth, the lips of which were parched and pale. At other times she was radiant. He seemed to be sitting with a girl, fresh, dewy, with sparkling eyes and that definite expression of youth about the mouth which art fails to imitate with all its ingenuities. Then her lovely hair, which, he fancied,

grew more thickly every day upon her beautifully shaped, small head, was a perfect frame to her face. But when she looked ill there was something strange, even something horrible in its abundance, its individuality, as if it stood aloof from her, refusing to have part or lot in the transformations she underwent.

These changes, of which he knew he understood very well the cause, awoke in Felix that protective instinct so cherished by youth on the verge of manhood, and also another feeling akin to jealousy. Mrs. Ismey, in her unselfishness and her sensitiveness, allowed herself to be really at the mercy of Lady Caroline. That was what Felix felt, what he began internally to protest against, for her sake and—perhaps, but he did not say so to himself—for his own.

He had seen nothing of Lady Caroline since she had come back from Paris. Now that he knew so much about her a sort of horror of her had taken possession of him. Mrs. Ismey did not try to dissipate it. He recognised that she was certain of the uselessness of any such attempt on her part.

'I think if Lady Caroline asks me to go to see her I'll make some excuse,' he had said to her.

'If you really feel like that!' was all she answered.

But he knew she understood. Lady Caroline sent him two invitations. He pleaded other engagements, left his card at her door, and there was an end of the matter. He did not meet her at Mrs. Ismey's, and guessed that Mrs. Ismey arranged matters so that he should not. It was an evidence of her delicacy of feeling. Besides the repugnance which he felt towards Lady Caroline, there was something else which prevented him from wishing to meet her. It seemed to him that he knew too much about her, that to be with her now would be almost an indecency, to accept her hospitality a sort of outrage. He could not regret knowing what he did, since without such knowledge he could not know Mrs. Ismey rightly; but he could keep away from her. She was far too careless a woman to bother about any one, and when one day Mrs. Ismey said to him, 'I believe Carrie's forgotten your existence,' Felix was not at all surprised.

'I sometimes wish you had forgotten hers,' he said.

As usual she was lying down on the sofa. Felix had called, as he often did, after leaving Sam's school. To-day she was looking ill and haggard, and was in melancholy spirits.

'Why?' she asked, without curiosity.

'Because I think you are too much her slave.'

His blunt remark seemed momentarily to rouse her, even to startle her.

'I—Carrie's slave!' she said, almost as if she were alarmed. 'I! What nonsense!'

She began to laugh rather unnaturally.

'Through your affection for her, I mean,' Felix went on.

As he looked at Mrs. Ismey's white, weary face and hollow eyes the anger and jealousy of Lady Caroline, which had been smouldering in him, began to glow.

'You are so wrapped up in her that everything she does affects you, not only your spirits but even your health. Your unselfishness is splendid, I know. Don't think I don't feel that. But—I say, don't be angry with me—unselfishness in regard to her may be selfishness in regard to others.'

'What do you mean? What others?'

The animation had died out of her face and manner already.

'Well, your husband, for instance,' said Felix, a little disingenuously. He paused, and then added, 'And perhaps your other friends.'

'Oh.'

She spoke the word so dully that he wondered if she had heard what he had said. He began to hate Lady Caroline.

'You don't care what I say!' he exclaimed. 'You don't care for anything when you are thinking about her. Some day you'll make me feel about Lady Caroline as—as your husband feels.'

'I can't help it if you do,' she replied, still in the same dry and feeble voice. 'What does it matter? What does anything matter?'

He looked at her curiously. Although he had often been struck by her violent alternations of mood and appearance he did not remember ever to have seen her look so haggard, so finished, as she looked this evening.

'You are ill,' he said anxiously.

'No.'

She moved on the sofa. He saw a glint of light on some small object which slipped from her dress and fell on to the floor.

'You've dropped something,' he said, bending down to pick it up.

Suddenly she showed animation. She sat up quickly.

'What?'

She began to feel in the front of her dress.

'It's only a cigarette-case. But what a beauty.'

'Give it me,' she said, taking, almost snatching it from him.

'You might let me look at it for a minute,' he said.

She seemed to recover herself.

'I'm nervous to-day,' she said. 'Here.'

And she held it out to him, but with a sort of reluctance, he thought.

'Why, how heavy it is,' he said, weighing it in his hand.

It was made of gold with a raised gold monogram.

'Awfully heavy,' he repeated.

'Yes, really it is, I scarcely ever use it.'

She held out her hand for it. He gave it to her.

'I keep it here,' she added.

She had hanging at her side a gold chatelaine, and now she fastened the cigarette-case on to a gold chain.

'I didn't know you had that,' he said.

'Oh, I have lots of idiotic things. Every woman has,' she answered. 'We are all of us babies.'

'I believe Lady Caroline gave it you,' he said slowly.

'Why do you think so?'

'I don't know. Did she?'

'Yes, she did. She got it in Berlin. The Germans are frightfully clever in making things of that kind.'

Felix was silent. He did not know why, but this small, trifling incident made him feel miserable and hopeless. Afterwards he supposed that it was the thought of Lady Caroline which had affected him. He longed to tear the pretty gold case off Mrs. Ismey's chatelaine.

'I must go now,' he said.

And he got up and went. She did not try to keep him. That night he understood something of Mr. Ismey's melancholy and even bitterness. Mr. Ismey had returned from abroad, and Felix occasionally met him, but not very often. He was much occupied by his great business. When they did meet, he was always very kind, but Felix was conscious of a deep reserve in his kindness, and never had the sensation of knowing what he was really like. Perhaps it was Felix's imagination, but ever since he had become the great friend of Mrs. Ismey he had fancied a barrier rising between him and her husband. This was strange because he was utterly free from any sense of guilt in his affection. His love for Mrs. Ismey was of such a nature that had her husband guessed it he might well have loved Felix for it. Felix did not understand why, but there were moments in which he felt as if Mr. Ismey, in some surreptitious, hidden, complex way, was the enemy of his wife. Mrs. Ismey had never

hinted that it was so. At least Felix could not remember that she had. She seldom talked about Francis, and when she did, it was generally in connection with Lady Caroline. Mr. Ismey had never repeated the touch of unreserve, almost of violence, which had startled Felix in the office. But Felix never forgot it. Since Mrs. Ismey had told him of her husband's hatred of Lady Caroline, he knew that he ought to accept that—if he were simply reasonable—as an explanation of the incident. Somehow it did not seem explanation enough. That Mr. Ismey was fond of his wife Felix felt convinced, that he was unhappy in his life was plain to Felix. His eyes spoke and his whole expression. Yet Mrs. Ismey always talked as if she were fond of him. Was Lady Caroline the whole cause of the unhappiness? Felix began to think of her, with his usual imaginative exaggeration, as a black figure scattering dust and ashes upon the hearts of men.

Yet he did understand, to some extent, Mr. Ismey's melancholy and bitterness, for if he, only a friend, was often painfully conscious of Mrs. Ismey's obsession by Lady Caroline's affliction, which obsession seemed, at moments, to put her into a region where no love, no sympathy could approach to affect her, how far more painfully conscious of it must a husband be.

The season before Christmas in London is a season of small dinners. The Ismeys, who knew an immense number of the clever and intellectual set, the set which is interested in literary affairs, and in all matters connected with intellectual progress, in new ideas, new mental departures—if there are such departures—dined out perpetually. And sometimes Mrs. Ismey, when Felix found her in one of her depressed and exhausted moods, attributed her condition to *ennui* brought on by her social obligations.

'One always has to be on the high horse,' she said one day, 'up to the mark with all these people. They are so preposterously clever that they make life a burden. I often wish Francis were a nobody instead of a great publisher. It bores me to dine out so much. I would far rather go to a music-hall with you. To struggle with such a crowd of great editors, authors, and critics is like endeavouring to negotiate Niagara in a pierced barrel.'

'You are equal to anything!' he said.

He had a profound belief in the quickness of her intellect, when she was not brooding over Lady Caroline's disordered affairs. Then she showed—not stupidity, never that—but a lack of continuity of mind, a lack of concentration and of

interests which were certainly trying. He wondered whether she only allowed him to notice this because he was so intimate with her, or whether other people, people she met in society, observed it sometimes too. If so, not knowing as he did the reason for it, they must surely be surprised and confused by it.

He had been introduced to some of her acquaintances, but he only knew them slightly, and he would never have dreamed of talking her over with them even had he known them well.

In December, not long before Christmas, the Ismeys gave a big reception after a dinner-party. Felix was among those invited to the reception. When he arrived at the house soon after eleven he found the drawing-rooms already full of people, some of whom he was acquainted with. He saw King Marshall, with his nervous, small figure and glowing, melancholy eyes, Lady Enfield anxiously listening to clever talk, and smiling to cover her lack of comprehension of it, Miss Hartfield, Mrs. Creshet, the Italian woman who had married an Englishman, and who was the friend of Marza. The poet, and no doubt his pretty companion also, had long since left the city of the barbarians. Felix had never seen him again.

Felix only spoke for an instant to Mrs. Ismey, but as she took his hand she whispered:

'You will see Carrie to-night.'

She said it, he fancied, with a sort of gay, almost childish mischief, and made what he now called her 'squirrel's face' at him. She was apparently in good spirits. Felix was startled by the idea of meeting Lady Caroline, and felt that it would be an event. But perhaps she would not speak to him. He wondered. While he was talking to Miss Hartfield he saw her come in. She was alone and, as always when he had seen her, was dressed in black. But to-night she wore a quantity of fine diamonds. He forgot what he was saying to Miss Hartfield while he looked at her. She was in no way changed. Her complexion was still abominable. Perhaps in the glare of the many electric lights it looked worse than usual. The strange wrinkles near her eyes, the deep dimples on each side of her mouth, struck him forcibly, as when he had first met her, and the contrast between her rather fat face and her thin, almost manly figure. But there was something in her air, her way of moving, which he could not help admiring, and more now that he saw her in a smart crowd. She was perhaps an ugly woman, she might be called a horrid-looking woman, but she was unmistakably a somebody.

'You know Lady Caroline Hurst?' said Miss Hartfield.

'Yes,' Felix answered, with an almost guilty start. 'Do you?'

'Slightly.'

He thought her voice was suddenly cold and that her clear, English face had grown grim.

'Do you like her?' Felix asked.

Directly he had said the words he wished to recall them. The question was too blunt. She felt it, no doubt, for she looked slightly surprised.

'I know her so very little,' she replied.

Felix was conscious that she had answered his question. Mr. Ismey was speaking to Lady Caroline, welcoming her. What an ironical situation. She stared at him with her ruthless, light eyes as she answered him without a smile. Felix thought of her fighting her way among the furies to the threshold of the room of the *morphineuse*. She fascinated him. He thought of Baron Hulot. Was he fascinated by the live woman as he had been by the creation of Balzac, and for the same reason? He wondered. He was glad that a diplomatist, with a bald head and a discreetly slight smile, spoke to Miss Hartfield at this moment. He wanted to be free to watch Lady Caroline. She talked to several people, as she made her way further into the large drawing-room. One of those who addressed her was a Roman Catholic priest, a famous preacher. Felix wondered what he was saying. She moved her chin upward. It was very strange. She certainly looked a strong woman, strong, dominating in character. Although he knew what she was he could not, as he looked at her, believe in his own knowledge of her. Presently she saw him staring at her. He reddened, feeling guilty. She nodded, continued to look at him, and almost immediately made him an autocratic sign to come and speak to her. He obeyed, feeling half glad, half afraid, and wholly excited. When he had edged his way through the crowd to her she said:

'Well, here you are; rejoicing in the mob, I suppose!'

He murmured something, he hardly knew what.

'You've given me up,' she continued, looking him full in the face.

'Oh, I was awfully sorry not to——' he stammered.

She interrupted him.

'Nonsense. You didn't want to come and so you refused. Very sensible of you. If everybody behaved like that—I invariably do—there'd be more happy people in London than

there are. I refused to come to-night, yet here I am. I wanted to see how Valeria looked made up.'

Felix returned her fixed stare with a sudden boldness. He was so angry that all his confusion vanished.

'What's the matter?' she said. 'Are you going to knock me down?'

There was a kind sound in her voice which had not been in it before.

'I know what it is,' she went on. 'You haven't noticed that she is made up, and you are going to tell me I'm a liar. My dear fellow, it isn't worth while. Say so to a man if you like. He'll believe you. Why shouldn't she make up? She looks delicious.'

Felix followed her eyes. She had turned them away from him now. He saw Mrs. Ismey at a little distance. There was a charming colour in her cheeks, not strong, not at all artificial-looking. It was as delicate and fresh as the hue in a fair girl's face, one of those blondes with a clear, white skin, blue eyes, and hair the shade of yellow that one sees in a corn-field. Could it be artificial? He did not remember that he had ever seen her look quite like that before.

'Now,' continued Lady Caroline, 'I'm going to talk to some one else. You're hating me too much to be able to amuse me. But my house is still open to you. Unless I hear from you I shall expect you to lunch on Sunday at two.'

She turned her back on him.

On Sunday at two he was in Great Cumberland Place, knocking at her door. He did not know exactly why he was there. He had not told Mrs. Ismey that he was going, or even that he had been asked to go. No expectation of meeting her there had brought him. Vague ideas, vague defiances, a sort of crowd of shapeless thoughts, intentions, hopes, fragmentary, wild ghosts of the mind led him, perhaps. He did not know. But he was there. While he waited in the cold winter weather on the step before the big door, which the servant had not yet opened, a strange idea flashed across his brain.

'If Mr. Ismey were different from what he is, less something —reserved, proud, sensitive—he might be standing where I am now.'

He had seen Mrs. Ismey once since her party, but only for a moment. Her face was grey, tormented. Her eyes were red. The maid, Alice, was with her in the drawing-room. When Felix had been shown in she had looked away and, keeping her face turned from him, had said;

'I did not mean even you to come in to-day. I have a horrible attack of neuralgia. Please forgive me, and go.'

Her voice had frightened him, and he had left the room without a backward glance. But, as he stood on the step of Lady Caroline's house, he remembered that moment, and the protective instinct was very strong in him. He did not know what he was going to do, but he felt like a combatant on the eve of a battle.

A man opened the door. Felix was shown into the small room which was evidently Lady Caroline's 'den.' She was there alone, standing by the fire with a book in her hand.

'Hullo!' she said. 'Lunch, Henry!'

'Yes, my lady.'

She and Felix shook hands. As they did so Felix thought of the money he had lent. How extraordinary life was! He heard a dog bark and started. It was Chicho, who peered at him with beadlike, black eyes over the edge of his basket.

'We are lunching alone,' said Lady Caroline. 'Did you expect a party?'

Felix did not know whether he had expected one or not. She did not wait for him to answer.

'I thought of asking Valeria,' she continued. 'And then I decided not to. Two women overwhelm one man. Besides, I want to know you.'

The man-servant reappeared.

'Luncheon is served, my lady.'

'Come along,' said Lady Caroline. 'We 'll leave Chicho in here.'

Felix glanced at the little dog as he followed her. Chicho was lying with his black muzzle resting on the red, cushioned edge of his basket, staring at the stranger. He did not seem to wish to follow them. Felix thought of the scene at the house of the *morphineuse* as he walked across the hall behind Lady Caroline, looking at her tall, upright figure. In the dining-room there was an electric bell let into the floor by Lady Caroline's chair. She could press it with her foot when she wished to summon the footman, who did not stay in the room, but came in with each course, handed it, and then at once went out.

'I object to have a servant's mind communing incessantly with mine—and yours,' Lady Caroline said. 'Henry is probably as clever as either you or I, but his cleverness trots on a different level. What made you come to-day?'

She stared at him calmly, and apparently without curiosity, from her place immediately opposite him.

'I don't know,' Felix answered.

He did not mean to be rude, he did not even feel as if he were being rude. Her bluntness was so natural that it summoned bluntness in him. The answer seemed to please her.

'No more do I,' she said. 'Unless it's because I meant you to come.'

That sounded like a challenge.

'You used your will to bring me?' Felix exclaimed.

Afterwards he wondered why he had been able to behave as he did behave that day, but he did not wonder when he was in the house.

'You think my will would be strong enough?' she asked.

He looked at her without shyness but, remembering all he knew about her, with a great deal of wonder.

'I don't know what to think about your will,' he replied.

It was the exact truth.

'Nor about me,' she said. 'But do you know what to think about any woman?'

'Yes, I do.'

He thought of Mrs. Ismey, of Margot, of his mother.

'I don't,' she said. 'I don't know what to think—we are using words loosely—I don't know how to know, that's more like it, any human being. In the first place—it's a firstrate beginning to the whole matter—I am a stranger to myself.'

There she stopped.

'Do, please, go on,' Felix said earnestly.

Already she had lit up all his young mind.

'About myself?'

'Yes.'

'You urge me to what we all adore, blatant egoism!'

He could not help smiling. She was certainly refreshing.

'Well—your boldness deserves its terrible reward—this is what I guess about the stranger. The stranger is a child—or rather a middle-aged woman—of the age. She lives consequently for herself. She faces the enigma of life without armour. In warfare armour has gone out of fashion. Lord Kitchener doesn't dress up in chain-mail. No more do I. (Let's drop the affectation of the third person.) It's diabolically difficult to be out of the mental mode. I'm in it. I wear no armour of belief. I have no religion. I live for life here, life in Great Cumberland Place, life in Paris, not life beyond the Woking Crematorium. Are you horrified?'

'No.'

'Thank—funny, I nearly said thank God!—thank you for your intelligence. You feel I'm just speaking the truth. And the man who is horrified at truth is the greatest of all fools, and unworthy of his manhood. I cling to no dream, but I deny no possibility. I read Omar every morning in bed, but not to cry over him, though he's the saddest man that ever thought. I read Tolstoy too. He makes me cry, if you like. And yet the glory of his madness is like the glory of the setting sun.'

Her voice was musical, but her face was like the face of an image. Why, how, did she grip Felix, move him so strangely that, at her last sentence, he felt tears rising in his eyes?

'I can't help feeling inclined to laugh,' she continued, 'when I see the very young generation, not only in Russia, falling on its knees to worship a thing that sets.'

'But it's the earth that——'

'H'm! A sun that allows itself to be dominated by the earth!'

Henry came in with a fresh course.

'D' you like this salad?' said Lady Caroline.

'Yes. It's delicious.'

Henry went out.

'I live for salads, not for eternity,' she said. 'There you have the legend of my egoism and of a million other egoisms. But I live so because it's the only way I can live. Free-will is what schoolboys call "a whopper."'

'Don't you think you do harm?'

'People ought to know how to take care of themselves. Would you call upon a whale to pick its way among whitebait?'

Again the thought came to Felix that Lady Caroline was a sort of monster. And yet she seemed to him essentially unmelodramatic and, somehow, very human.

'That sounds conceited,' she added. 'But I believe I am conceited. Again because I'm a child of the age. I've told you something of what I know about myself. It's a good deal like what I know about the people I meet, my dearest friends: that they go to Paquin or Whiteley for their clothes; that they have Roman or Grecian, or—poor souls!—merely English noses; that they "attend," or don't "attend" church, and so on. Myself is the greatest stranger to me in all the narrow, narrow world. Now I'll stop boring you. Egoism is, after all, the most deadly of the deadly sins. That's why we cling to it. By the way, I was idiot enough to begin this monologue by saying that I wanted to know you!'

A faint smile deepened the little holes by her mouth.

'You make me feel an awful fool,' exclaimed Felix.

'Sorry! Why?'

'When I was—a few months ago I felt as if I knew everything.'

'But don't you now? You ought to. You 're hardly of age, I suppose?'

'I shall be twenty-one in January.'

'Far too young to feel anything but a learned Methuselah. Valeria must have been educating you.'

The blood rushed to Felix's cheeks, the old, silly feeling of guilt to his heart. And, instantly after it, came a feeling of anger. The shapeless ghosts, which had floated about him as he stood on the doorstep, began to take form, to emerge almost clearly out of the void.

'Has she taught you to think, for half a second, that you know her?' continued Lady Caroline.

'I know enough to—to admire her character very much,' Felix said.

'Well?' said Lady Caroline, after a short silence.

But he did not know how to go on. What could he say of all he longed to say? He could not tell Lady Caroline what Mrs. Ismey had told him. And, without telling her, he could not draw a sword in Mrs. Ismey's defence. Yet, when he remembered the misery in her face which he had caught a glimpse of at the drawing-room door, the agony of mind which he had been witness of on more than one occasion, he was inclined to forget all social hindrances, all the fetters in which the 'gentleman' instinctively dances—as a rule unconscious of them—and to speak out what was in his heart, passionately, furiously almost.

'You may!' Lady Caroline said, as the starter of a race says 'Go!'

'You—you don't know what——'

He had spoken the words very slowly and hesitatingly. Now he stopped dead.

'Let's clear the ground,' Lady Caroline said. 'Valeria's been telling you a lot about me lately.'

Felix looked away from her. He did not know whether he minded or not, but he felt as if he could not look at her just then.

'Did you suppose I didn't know it? Why, at first, you took a decided fancy to me. An invitation from me pleased you. Something has changed all that. What? Of course

Valeria. She's been describing my supposed vices. For instance, she has told you I take morphia.'

Felix said nothing. He could not speak. All this was so utterly unexpected by him. He had just time for the thought, 'She's going to deny it,' when she continued:

'Perfectly true. I do take it, as I take salad. I don't think it necessary—indeed I should think it vulgar—to go about London informing people of all my habits. But I am not in the least ashamed of being fond of morphia. Why should I be?'

Felix looked at her again now. She was gazing at him with her usual calm self-possession.

'Why should I be?' she repeated.

'I don't know,' he answered.

'At the same time Valeria——'

'She—she did it from the best motive,' said Felix quickly.

He never thought of lying for Mrs. Ismey. Lady Caroline had spoken with so much certainty that a lie would have been useless. And then he was not fond of lies.

'Oh.'

There was not a trace of bitterness in her voice, but there was some irony.

'Really she did,' he insisted. 'I don't know why, but she thought—she hoped——'

He stopped. Sitting there with Lady Caroline, his eyes upon hers, he could not tell her that Mrs. Ismey had thought that he might help in some way. In what way could he help? What influence could he have with a woman like Lady Caroline?

'What did she hope?'

Being rather desperate he became more frank.

'I say,' he exclaimed, almost with impetuosity, 'since you've spoken of it, let me just tell you that I'm sure you don't, you can't know the harm you've done Mrs. Ismey.'

For the first time since he had known her Lady Caroline's face changed abruptly and became highly expressive. She looked surprised, more, utterly astonished.

'Valeria has——' she began. She stopped. 'What harm?' she asked.

'I don't believe you have any idea how much she cares for you,' said Felix.

'Well, but what harm?'

'Harm to her mind and her health.'

The surprise, which had been dying out of her face, returned to it.

'Then she has told you everything?'

'Yes—I don't mean about you, but about herself.'

'About herself! How strangely frank. And what do you think of it?'

She looked at him with open curiosity.

'I think that, for her sake, you might—it would be most awfully good of you to drop it,' he said boldly.

He was thinking only of Mrs. Ismey now. Lady Caroline had offered him a chance of helping the woman he loved. He could not be such a coward as not to avail himself of it, defying conventions.

'Drop it? drop morphia!'

'Yes.'

'But what earthly good would that do to Valeria now?'

'Why, every good. Surely, surely you must know, you must see how it's ruining her life, her happiness, even her health.'

'What?'

'Your taking morphia.'

'My taking morphia!'

'Yes. Oh, but I see that you don't understand in the least how much she cares for you. Perhaps she conceals it from you, but she has let me know it.'

'Look here,' said Lady Caroline, with sledge-hammer bluntness, 'just explain to me what Valeria has let you know. Possibly I'm in the dark. I begin to think I am.'

'She has let me know that your taking morphia preys upon her mind to such an extent that it is ruining her whole life,' said Felix, with responsive bluntness.

There was something in Lady Caroline, something manly, which made it possible for him to speak to her now as he might have spoken to a man.

'And that is all she has told you?'

'Yes, of course with some details——'

'Oh, trust a woman to go into details!' she said, again with irony.

'But that's what it comes to. O Lady Caroline, I haven't the least right—not a shadow of a right, I know—to say a single word to you on my own account. I would never dare. But if any one loves you, don't you think that fact makes you owe them something? If only you'd give that up she—Mrs. Ismey—would be a different woman.'

She was quite silent and sat motionless, looking at him with her intent, light eyes, from which the little lines drooped towards her almost livid cheeks.

'You know as well as I do how she's suffered!' he exclaimed, goaded by her silence. 'You know what she did in Paris.'

'What did she do?'

Still there was irony in her voice.

'When she went to that house to get you to come away from the *morphineuse*. Think of her in such a place!'

All the love of the boy was up in arms now. The protective instinct broke loose and ran into the light.

'Ah, she's told you of that too!'

'She trusts me,' he said, as if that were a full answer to all.

'She trusts you,' repeated Lady Caroline.

Surely there was pity in her voice when she said that. Felix even thought that there was pity in the eyes that were still gazing at him so steadily. Pity! What did she mean by it?

'You don't believe it! You think I'm too young!' he exclaimed.

'I think a woman would do very well to trust you,' she replied quietly. 'Very well indeed. You don't want anything more?'

'More?' he said.

'To eat? To drink?'

'Oh. No thanks.'

'Let's come into my room, then.'

She got up and led the way. In the hall the footman met them.

'Mrs. Bertold is in the drawing-room, my lady.'

'Oh.'

She turned to Felix.

'We must go up there, then,' she said.

But Felix felt that he could not face the petrifying inanity of the woman with the pepper-and-salt hair.

'I—d'you mind if—I think I ought to be going,' he stammered.

'Good-bye,' she said.

She grasped his hand, very cordially it seemed to him. Then, while he went to look for his hat and coat, she walked up the broad staircase.

phrase. Yes, he must go down to Churston Waters for Christmas. He wrote that of course he was coming, and he went. He took presents with him, bought hastily at the last moment, for his mother, Margot, and Stephen. Having delayed going till further delay was impossible, he arrived on Christmas Eve. The weather was dreary. Rain fell steadily from a sky covered with leaden clouds. The air was full of a cold dampness that seemed charged with maladies like the casket of Pandora. Railway traffic was disorganised, and the train by which Felix travelled was an hour late. He found the carriage waiting for him. The coachman handed him from the box a little note. He read it, holding it against the carriage lamp.

'Welcome. I wanted so to come and meet you, but I am not feeling very well, and cannot venture out in this weather for fear of taking a fresh cold and not being able to go to church with you to-morrow. Love.—MOTHER.'

He thrust it into his pocket, shut up his umbrella, and got into the carriage. 'Not feeling very well—fear of taking a fresh cold.' It was pretty obvious to Felix that his mother was fast developing into a hypochondriac. These vague phrases showed it, this anticipation of possible illness. She was always looking forward to physical calamity, always not doing something 'for fear of' a possible bodily result of an unpleasant kind. Rather feeble and cowardly that. A real, terrible illness, such as Mrs. Ismey's, was a very different matter. His whole being went out in sympathy to her, but his mother's little colds and incessant precautions irritated him. He resolved to beg her, in schoolboy phrase, to 'buck up,' to show some courage. That was what she was wanting in—courage. Women often became confirmed invalids from brooding over their health, and incessantly coddling themselves.

As he drove on he saw Frankton Wells blurred by the heavily falling rain. The shops were brilliantly lit up. Those occupied by butchers, with open fronts, displayed gigantic joints of meat decorated with sprigs of holly, and bearing placards announcing that they were cut from 'Prime' oxen. In the poulterers' windows squadrons of turkeys attracted the gaping attention of multitudes of soaked rustics, who had tramped in from the country districts to buy such 'Christmas Fare' as the condition of their finances would allow. Upon the glistening pavements of the old-fashioned streets anxious women, swathed in unfashionable waterproofs, scurried by, protected by umbrellas, and carrying strings of parcels covered

with brown paper, discoloured and spotted here and there by the raindrops. Many of them were accompanied by excited children, whose youthful ardour, wrought to fever-heat by the nearness of the approaching festival, rose triumphant over the depressing influences of the villainous evening hour.

Felix remembered very well his own childish pleasure in bygone Christmases, and wondered at his vanished self. To-night, the lighted shops, the mighty joints, the holly, the placards, the scurrying wet crowds intent on present-buying, all seemed to combine deliberately in an effort to create a false atmosphere of artificial geniality, artificial goodwill. Even the wet, blank darkness of the country was less depressing than the meretricious bustle of the country town. He thought of the morrow with its services, the decorated church, the greetings of the neighbours, the Christmas dinner with its blazing plum-pudding and possibly crackers at dessert. Well, he would have to get through it somehow. It would pass. The moment must inevitably come when it would all be over, and he would be free to get back to London, free to go to her door and glean some scanty news of her condition.

Suppose she were to be dead! He had never thought of that before. With that thought came Hill House, his mother's affectionate greeting in the holly-bedecked hall, the servants' 'The compliments of the season to you, sir!' his bedroom with more holly. Life has some dreadful moments, some dreadful decorated moments.

After that Christmas was over Felix often wondered what must have been the exact impression created by him on the people he met. He must surely have seemed a little mad to them all: to the elderly clergyman, the village doctor and his sprightly wife, who was always perky even if she were only saying that there was 'a good deal of bronchitis going about'; Miss Crooks, the authoritative spinster who had 'had charge' of the chancel decorations of the church since the beginning of time, and who would brook no word of advice on her 'scheme' even from the rector himself; the village schoolmaster, the organist, all the good creatures—that was what Felix mentally called them—who had known him, and whom he had known, since he was a small boy in the days of buttonholes and bead rings. His profound depression must have amazed their determined seasonable geniality. No doubt he had struggled against it, but he felt sure that the struggle had been in vain. The bitter mockery of Christmas to him must have been guessed at by them, secretly denounced by them perhaps as

seriously ill. Did you know it? Mr. Ismey wrote it to Stephen in his Christmas letter.'

The blood rushed to Felix's face. He wondered if he would ever conquer that hideous, degrading habit of blushing.

'I—I knew she had been unwell,' he said.

His face grew hotter and hotter till he felt as if he were on fire, and he went on speaking hastily, as if words would form a sort of veil to cover his misery and agitation.

'I haven't seen her for some time. She hasn't been out, I believe. You see, the weather in London has been so awful. It started with a chill, didn't it?'

He looked at Stephen. He was torn by the longing to ask exactly what was in Mr. Ismey's letter.

'A chill?' said Stephen.

Felix thought his brother-in-law's voice sounded unusually grim and odd, in some furtive, some secret way, as if he wished and intended it to be ordinary, but was governed, prompted, in spite of himself, to hint at some feeling he would have been glad to conceal.

'Yes, a chill. I know it started with that. Perhaps it has developed—has it developed into something else?'

'Mr. Ismey didn't say exactly what was the matter. Did he, Stephen?' said Margot, with a well-meaning assumption of interest which did not hide real and perfectly natural indifference.

Stephen hesitated to reply. That was obvious. A ghastly idea came into Felix's mind that Mrs. Ismey was dying, and that Stephen did not like to say so. He remembered that Mr. Ismey and Stephen had been brought up together, that there was a strong link of affection between them. What more natural than that, in his trouble, Mr. Ismey should have made Stephen his confidant? Suddenly Felix felt a profound interest in his brother-in-law. But how could he dare to show it?

'Francis said nothing about a chill,' Stephen answered at last.

His voice was odd, constrained. Even Mrs. Wilding noticed it. She glanced from him to Felix.

'I am very sorry,' she said. 'It is specially sad at Christmas-time.'

'I don't see why,' exclaimed Felix.

He spoke almost fiercely. Every one looked startled, as if he had said something dreadfully heartless.

'I mean,' he explained, trying to control the agitation which had burst forth in spite of himself in his last remark, 'that it

seems to me the illness of anybody one cares for is equally sad at any time of the year. But I dare say Mrs. Ismey will be all right again soon.'

He said it as a statement, not as a question, but he looked at Stephen with narrow, piercing anxiety. Stephen said nothing. He sat gazing into the fire with his hands on his knees, his long clerical coat drooping towards the carpet. On his red face there was surely a stern expression. He had not expressed any sorrow at Mrs. Ismey's illness. Again Felix thought of Mr. Ismey's remark, 'I 'm afraid she may have to be worse before she is better,' and of his wild fears for Mrs. Ismey. As he stared at Stephen they returned. There was something mysterious about this illness, something that had to be hidden, something cruel. And Stephen knew what it was.

The butler entered to say that the fly had come for Mr. and Mrs. Bosanfield. Margot got up. As she did so, despite his desperate preoccupation, it occurred to Felix that, since he had last seen her, she was altered in some way. She looked different. She said good-bye.

'Take great care of yourself, dearest mother,' she said, as she kissed Mrs. Wilding.

Felix very nearly interposed with his lecture against coddling and being hypochondriacal, but he restrained himself. He would speak to his mother about that on the morrow. He followed his sister and brother-in-law into the hall, put Margot's cloak round her, and then went to help Stephen with his large, black garment, which was batlike and voluminous. A desperate desire haunted him to get a word alone with his brother-in-law. But even if he did, what could he say? He could not ask to be told all that was in a private letter.

'Good-bye,' said Stephen, placing his soft hat firmly on his head, and pulling the brim down till it almost touched his bushy eyebrows. 'Won't you ride over to see us to-morrow?'

'Oh yes, do, Felix!' said Margot eagerly. 'You haven't been for so long.'

'Bring the mother,' added Stephen. 'I know she will not want to be separated from you more than she can help. Come to luncheon or tea.'

'Thanks very much; I will certainly.'

Felix spoke quite as eagerly as Margot. The morrow might bring him an opportunity of speaking to Stephen alone, of getting somehow—he had no idea how—to the bottom of this mystery.

On Boxing Day the weather was again deplorable. The rain

went out together. Stephen followed them with his eyes. An odd expression came into his face as he did so. Felix noticed it and wondered what it meant. It was, he said to himself, a very human look. The clergyman disappeared in the man. As Stephen watched the two women just then he might have been a labourer, a soldier; he might even have been a ne'er-do-weel to whose heart a tender feeling had come.

When the door was shut he said to Felix:

'What a good woman the mother is. I never felt how precious goodness is till lately and through her, not even with my own dear mother. For she has not had to face so much, through the mercy of God.'

Felix was so thoroughly accustomed to the idea that his mother was a good woman that his 'Yes, I know,' was perhaps rather perfunctory. He was longing to make the most of this opportunity of being alone with Stephen. They sat silent for a moment. Then Felix said with some nervous hurry:

'Awfully hard lines on your friend having Mrs. Ismey laid up, isn't it?'

The human look disappeared from Stephen's face.

'Francis has had a good deal to bear in his life,' he replied.

Felix instantly felt intensely hostile to his brother-in-law.

'Well, after all, it 's Mrs. Ismey who 's suffering most now,' he said.

'Physically,' said Stephen.

'Physical suffering 's hardly a thing to laugh at when it brings a—a person to death's door,' said Felix, almost trembling with the anger he did not dare to show.

'Let us hope, for her sake, that Mrs. Ismey will recover,' responded Stephen.

There was a marked emphasis on the 'for her sake.'

Felix bit his lip. At that moment he could have struck Stephen. Only his overpowering desire to know the exact truth of Mrs. Ismey's condition prevented him from some outburst. After an instant of silence he said, with an attempt at careless curiosity:

'Does—do the doctors think she 's likely to recover?'

'I believe they consider it possible.'

The door opened and Mrs. Wilding and Margot came in. Felix was obliged to drive away with his mother not merely unsatisfied, but with all his fears increased tenfold. He scarcely spoke on the way home. At dinner and afterwards in the drawing-room he was gloomy, morose. When his mother addressed him he scarcely seemed to hear her. Once or twice he contradicted her rudely. When she bade him good-night

and kissed him tenderly, he shrank obviously from her caress. All the time he was thinking, 'If she should die, if she should die.' That night he felt as if his whole life had been lived since he had known Mrs. Ismey; as if, before he knew her, he had been like the little children, who regard the sun or a puddle in the road with the same gaze of dull, staring wonder.

His mother was a shadow to him, something far off from his life. When she kissed him he thought of Mrs. Ismey's lips. Perhaps already the pallor of death was upon them.

The next morning he caught the first express from Frankton Wells to London. He did not even try to conceal from his mother his intense eagerness to leave her and be again in town. When the carriage had driven away from the door she went slowly upstairs to her bedroom. Some hours passed before she came down. At luncheon the butler noticed that she was looking 'mortal bad,' as he said afterwards to the other servants, and that she hardly ate anything.

'She's moping,' was the general verdict, 'after Master Felix.'

All the domestics at Hill House, in general conclave assembled, agreed that it was a sad pity to mope.

'Life's too short for it,' observed the upper housemaid, who, having recently become engaged to the rector's gardener, was an impassioned optimist for the moment. And the turkey and plum-pudding devoted to the appetites of the servants' hall still holding out bravely against the repeated assaults made upon them, there was not one to say her nay.

Felix was to be twenty-one in the third week in January. He wrote to his mother from London that he would not be able to come down to spend his birthday with her. He had too much to do, and he thought that, after one had reached a certain age, 'birthdays are a mistake.' A letter from Margot, soon after he had expressed this opinion, wished him very, very many happy returns of the day, and told him: 'We are afraid poor mother is sadly disappointed at not having you with her for it. She does not say so, but we can't help seeing it by her manner. She seems to have no spring lately, no life for anything.'

Felix tore up the letter directly he had read it, and threw it into the fire.

'We!' he exclaimed half aloud. 'We! I know who is teaching Margot to lecture me.'

Ever since that short conversation with Stephen about Mrs. Ismey's illness Felix had disliked him more than ever. He almost hated him. And now, in his mind, he connected Stephen not only with Margot, but also closely with his mother. He thought of them all as adverse to Mrs. Ismey. It was evident to him

As he walked up the street he felt nervous and shy. Perhaps her illness had altered her. Perhaps, after this long interval, during which their intercourse had been interrupted, she had changed. He might find that their intimacy was broken. They might have nothing to say to each other. Would she be still in bed or on the sofa? And her looks? No doubt in her face he would find something of the horror of her illness still lingering. He must be prepared for that. He must not expect her to look charming, to have any light in her eyes, or life in her manner. At this moment he quite forgot how often he had sat with her and seen her looking ill from worry.

The servant let him in. It seemed very strange and eventful to step once more into the hall, to mount the stairs. Would the footman stop at the drawing-room door, or go on to the next floor, where probably her bedroom was? He stopped on the first landing, opened the drawing-room door, and announced Felix.

Felix went in, walking with precaution. He felt inclined to hold his breath—till he saw her. But when he saw her his doubts and fears, his shyness and almost awkward timidity vanished. She looked so startlingly well.

She was lying on the sofa as usual, and had a book in her hand, which she laid down as he came towards her, turning to him with a smile. Her gown was pale green and fitted tightly to her figure. There was nothing that suggested the invalid about it. She could have walked out in it.

'But—but how well you look!' was all he could say, while he took her hand. 'How well you look!'

'Do I?'

'But—but it's extraordinary!'

As he gazed at her clear eyes, at her soft, fresh-looking skin, at her rosy, moist lips, it seemed to him that he had been tricked, that she had never been ill at all.

'Why extraordinary? I'm not ill now. Sit down. My dear boy, what's the matter? Are you petrified?'

He gave a great sigh and sat down, still looking at her with a sort of fascinated amazement. She made the squirrel's face at him, screwing up her eyes. That seemed to break the spell. He laughed.

'Oh, I am glad! I am glad!' he exclaimed.

And he sat there in silence staring at her, almost like a little boy. She laughed too.

'You would make even a woman of a certain age feel young,' she said. 'Where's your top? Don't you want to play with it?'

And he had thought that perhaps their intimacy was broken! He had prepared himself for—idiot!

'Oh, I'm such an ass!' he said fervently.

'No doubt, but why?'

'If only you knew all I have been thinking as I walked up the street!'

'Tell me.'

'And all I've been thinking while you've been ill.'

'Life is short. Still, tell me as much as the Judgment Day leaves us time for.'

He told her some of his thoughts. She listened. Sometimes she smiled, sometimes she laughed. But presently the gaiety died away from her face and she looked grave. Carried away by his surprise and joy in finding her so well, his former suspicions seemed to Felix so absurd that he began to recount them to her, to make a joke of them.

'I thought—I hardly know what I thought,' he said: 'that you had been made ill deliberately, that you would never have been ill at all if—if——'

'If what?' she said.

The sound of her voice startled him.

'If—— What's the matter?' he said.

'Nothing.'

'But you look angry.'

She smiled suddenly.

'No, I'm not. Don't be so imaginative. It's tiresome. Go on.'

But he could not go on.

'No,' he said. 'I am talking nonsense.'

'But I want to hear it.'

'No, no,' he repeated.

The expression he had seen on her face had warned him that to speak, as he had been about to speak, of his wild suspicions of her husband, even to laugh at them and ridicule himself, would be injudicious if not unpardonable. He was thankful he had stopped in time.

'Who did you think had made me ill?' she asked obstinately.

'Nobody. But what was it?'

'I told you. It was a chill.'

Felix thought of his brother-in-law's odd, constrained manner when it had been suggested that Mrs. Ismey's illness was the result of a chill. What could have caused it?

'I am afraid you have suffered terribly,' he said.

'Suffered!'

A dreadful expression flitted across her face. Felix supposed it must be caused by the memory of the pain she had endured, but it looked like an expression of hatred.

'We won't talk about it,' she said. 'What's the use? It's over and it shall never happen again.'

'You speak as if you knew you could never be ill again in that way,' he said.

'I do know it.'

That seemed utterly impossible to him. There was something implacable in her manner. In her convalescence she was surely changed. He seemed to detect a strength of character in her, a something almost fierce, which he had never been conscious of before. But it must always have been there. Had she not put in her foot to force an entrance into the house of the *morphineuse*.

She smiled, changed the conversation, and seemed gay once more. She asked about all that Felix had done, about his work, about the people he had met.

'You haven't seen Carrie, I suppose?' she asked presently.

Felix remembered that he had a confession to make.

'Yes, once. I went to luncheon with her.'

'To luncheon?'

She looked surprised, and not very pleased, he thought.

'Yes. It was just after your party.'

'Oh! Were there many people?'

'No. Only she and I.'

'You and Carrie alone! How did you get on?'

'Very well.'

'I'm glad of that.'

Her voice did not sound as if she were really very glad.

'I haven't seen Carrie once since I have been ill,' she added.

'I think she might have come,' he said, with sudden heat.

'Oh, it was not her fault. Poor old Carrie.'

'Wasn't it? I suppose the doctor——'

She interrupted him.

'I always tell you everything, so I may as well tell you this. She didn't come because my husband has forbidden her the house.'

'Lady Caroline—forbidden!'

It seemed to Felix to be an outrage.

'Then he's——?'

'Yes. He's found out all about the morphia.'

'But not about—he doesn't know about Paris?'

'Yes, he does.'

'How awful!'

Felix was thinking of her situation. But now he thought of the letters and grew hot.

'And the letters?' he said.

'You don't suppose I gave you away!'

When she said this she made him feel as if, for a moment, he had been a cur.

'Did you notice that a new man opened the door to you to-day?'

'Yes. I've seen him once before when I inquired.'

'The other one was given warning.'

'Was it he—did he——?'

Felix could not get the words out. The whole thing seemed so low, so abominably common and vulgar.

'He was treacherous. He told Francis I had been away from home, and the whole thing came out. Francis had always hated Carrie. There was a frightful row. It was partly that which made me ill. I have gone through a good deal, Felix.'

'How I pity you,' he said in a low voice. 'Was your husband very angry?'

Instead of replying she asked him a question.

'Do you remember my saying once that I could imagine Francis killing me but not scolding me?'

'Yes. It was on the day I dined with you at Lady Caroline's.'

'I did not know then how true a thing I was saying,' she replied.

Again the dreadful expression went across her face. Felix knew now that he had been right when he had suspected that there was a mystery about her illness. He was sure from the way she spoke that her husband was concerned in it. But how? Could there have been a scene of violence? Could Mr. Ismey have——?

He drew his chair close to the sofa on which she was lying.

'Look here,' he said. 'I don't want to seem curious, but has there been anything—I mean, do you want some one to protect you? Because, if you ever do, you know I would do anything —anything for you.'

He had never before come so near to telling her that he loved her.

'I think you would,' she said. 'I don't know whether some day I mayn't ask you to do a great deal—one never knows. My husband——' She hesitated.

Felix felt that she was on the verge of an outbreak. There was fire in her eyes. Her hands began to tremble. She clasped them together.

'I feel very differently about Francis from what I did before I was ill,' she said at last.

She spoke quietly, but there was a depth of hatred in her voice.

'How strange of him to leave you. Wasn't it?'

'I made the doctor tell him to go,' she replied.

There was a silence between them. It seemed to Felix as if he had just seen a tragedy enacted in the pretty room where he was sitting, as if he had seen her struck down. He was fearfully excited. He longed to get up and perform some physical act in defence of her. He did not dare to look at her lest she should see too much in his eyes. At that moment his feeling for her changed. Something of the intense purity went out of it, something of savagery entered in. It had been very boyish in its almost cold chivalry and lack of sensuality. Now the desire to fight for her brought with it a faint, as yet a very faint, stirring of the possessive instinct which lies at the root of most men's love. She was the first to speak again. Her voice and manner had quite changed as she said:

'Well, what did Carrie and you find to talk about together?'

She spoke lightly in a voice of society, but his reply at once drove her back to a much graver mood. It seemed as if their first interview was not to be untroubled.

'We talked about you,' Felix said, resolved to make a clean breast of the matter.

He would rather have lied to his mother than have lied to her that day.

'We talked about you, and I've been wanting ever since to tell you what we—that is, what I said. I think perhaps you'll be very angry.'

He looked at her anxiously. He was really wondering how she would take his confession.

'Why? What did you say?'

She spoke quickly, uneasily.

'I told her what you had told me about her.'

It sounded to his own ears awful, put in that naked way, and he hastened to add:

'She knew already that you had told me. She said so, and of course I had to acknowledge the truth.'

She had opened her lips while he was speaking, as if to interrupt him, but when he said the last words she closed them again, and lay there looking at him with steady eyes.

'You would not have had me lie about it?' he said.

'Oh no.'

The words sounded bitterly ironical.

'Would you have had me lie?' he asked.

'I said no. No, of course not.'

This time she spoke as if she meant what she said.

'And when I had told her that I knew about—all about the morphia, I begged her to give it up for your sake. I tried to make her understand the truth.'

'What truth?'

'Why, that her way of life was making you ill, through the anxiety and fear, and the——'

'You told her all that?'

'Yes,' he said, growing more confident now that the confession was out at last. 'And I showed her how appalling it was for you to be led into such places as that den in Paris in order to persuade her——'

'But, Carrie,' she interrupted suddenly, as if almost in spite of herself. 'What did Carrie say?'

'Scarcely anything.'

It struck him now how little she had said.

'Well, but what did she seem like? What did she look like?'

He thought for a moment.

'I hardly know; but I remember it seemed to me as if she pitied——'

'Me!'

'No,' he said slowly. 'Me.'

'Pitied you!'

'It was very strange. I can't think why.'

He looked at her. She shut her eyes at once and lay back on her cushions.

'Oh, you're tired,' he exclaimed. 'I've tired you!'

'Yes,' she said, keeping her eyes shut. 'You see we've talked so much, and about such dreadful things.'

'Shall I go?'

She shook slightly, as a person shakes who is suppressing laughter.

'Yes, go now. Good-bye.'

Her voice quivered and broke. She touched his hand. He got up quickly.

'Good-bye,' he said. 'You're not feeling very bad, are you?'

She did not answer, but again she shook against the cushions. He went out.

'She couldn't—she couldn't have been laughing,' he kept on saying to himself as he went down the stairs. And when he was in the street he thought:

'Or was she crying?'

CHAPTER XXV

ONE day very early in March Felix received a note from Mrs. Ismey to say that her husband, who had returned from abroad soon after her recovery, had gone up to Scotland for a week on business, and that she meant to run down to the seaside.

Felix had noticed that her beautiful look of health, which had so delighted him, had died away, that the physical and mental irregularities, which had puzzled and distressed him in the past, began to present themselves once more. She said in her note that she was 'feeling seedy' and thought the sea air would pick her up. She was going to take Alice as a companion, and had written for rooms to a quiet little hotel on the south coast at a village called Eldon Sands. Did Felix think there was any chance of his being able to join them from Saturday to Monday? She would love it if he could, and it would cheer her up. She was depressed, and hated the noise of London.

Felix was enchanted. He had not seen Mrs. Ismey in the country since the day of Margot's wedding. Visions of the sea, of sunset over flat sands, of isolation with her in a beautiful solitude filled with the music of nature, with the freshness of nature's breath, the calm of nature's repose passed through his brain and thrilled his heart. He telegraphed that he would come, and on the Saturday he got into the train and, with a sensation of joy that was almost exultant, saw the dingy platform, the red-faced porters, the empty luggage-trucks disappear in the murky greyness of the London atmosphere, saw the pale fields come up on either side of the train to greet him, brown ploughlands curving under a quiet, whitish sky, cottages standing alone among the leafless trees which would soon be budding, roads like narrow ribands winding away into the low, rounded hills, or stretching across plains on which the tiny figures of labourers moved like busy dolls.

It was afternoon and drawing towards twilight. An infinite delicacy was alive in the pensive radiance, when, through the

thin screen of narrow clouds, the sun sent a trembling beam which rested, with a sort of humble cheerfulness, upon some empty garden, village green, or leafless orchard, reminding Felix of the ethereal radiance which had stirred in the bosom of the forest when he bade good-bye to the tailor. Then he had felt as if the wide earth held but a trinity of personalities: God, nature, himself. Now, leaning out of the window, he set his face towards the sea and thought of a woman.

What would she be like by the sea?

It seemed to him that the wave and the solitude would set the seal on their great friendship, which had been waiting, like a thing held in abeyance, for this event of which he had never dreamed. Never once had he thought of being alone with her in a country place, of being out with her under the stars as he was with her in the garden at Churston Waters, on the night of their first meeting. Why had he been so thoughtless, so unimaginative? Was theirs to be a mere drawing-room intimacy? Had it not begun under the sky at night? And he remembered the strange, uneasy flight of the bats across the shaven lawn. He remembered how the moonlight caught her hair when she bent down so suddenly after he had left her. That night she had been mysterious to him. Would she be mysterious to him again?

The twilight began to enclose the quiet country. Lights shone in the cottages. The world was surely very full of silence and of dreams.

When the train ran into the tiny station of Eldon Sands Mrs. Ismey and Alice were on the platform to meet him. Mrs. Ismey was in country clothes. She had on a short gown of some woolly material, dull blue in colour, with a thin line of dark red in it, a little blue-and-red toque with a scarlet upstanding feather on one side, brown boots, and brown suède gloves. She carried a walking-stick in her hand. Felix looked at her eagerly. He was so accustomed to see her lying down on a sofa that this was a new and exciting experience. Alice stood a little way off while they exchanged greetings and looked towards the sea, which was tumbling in foam upon the flat yellow sands. When Felix wished her good-evening she murmured a respectful reply.

He thought she was the most subdued girl he had ever seen.

'We will walk to the hotel. It is close by,' said Mrs. Ismey.

They set out, followed by Alice and by a porter carrying his bag. Eldon Sands was really a solitary place. Felix saw that at once, and was glad. There was the small, neat station, with its brown doors and red-tiled roof, a few bungalows with wooden shutters closely drawn across their windows, a large shed which

sion which at first he hated. The three other people whom she had spoken of sat at some distance away in the large, low room, which was full of oases of light from the shaded lamps. One of them was an oldish man with an ascetic face, who was by himself. The other two were women, thin, inexpressive, dressed in black, evidently sisters.

'They are of the wandering spirit *genre*,' Mrs. Ismey murmured to Felix. 'I heard them talking once.'

'What about?'

'Different kinds of tea.'

The delight of being alone with her soon made him forget that unnatural expression which had startled him. They did not talk very much, but he thought that they were more intimate in the silences, when they watched the firelight dancing on the yellow walls, and heard the murmur of the sea. After dinner the two sisters wandered out. They both walked slightly sideways, looking on the ground as if searching for a pin. The man with the ascetic face lit a cigarette, sighed, asked the waiter to light up the billiard-room, and disappeared. A moment later the click of the balls was audible.

'We'll have coffee here by the fire,' Mrs. Ismey said.

There were two large armchairs near the hearth. The countrified waiter brought a basket table.

'Light your cigar,' she said. 'Not a cigarette to-night. That is for London. A cigar suggests leisure.'

'Yes, I know exactly what you mean,' he answered. 'I am happy to-night.'

He struck a match. The waiter put their coffee on the table, and went out, shutting the white door. Felix sat down in one of the armchairs, but Mrs. Ismey remained standing by the fire. She was dressed in grey, with long tight-fitting sleeves which partly covered her hands. She put the coffee-cup on the high mantelpiece.

'You are always happy, I believe,' she said, in the drawling voice which he had learnt to love.

'Oh no, I'm not. And I could be horribly unhappy.'

'If what?'

He looked up at her from his low chair. Her last words had made him realise sharply just what made his happiness that night—isolation with her.

'Don't you know?' he asked.

Something in him seemed to be trembling. She shook her head. The firelight was surely entangled in her thick and shining hair.

'How can I?' she said, lifting her coffee-cup and saucer from the mantelpiece.

He heard the distant sound of the sea, the voice of the wind round the house. He remembered the solitude of the flat sands outside. Everything seemed far away from them, and he resolved to tell her.

'If I were to be separated from——'

He never finished the sentence, for just then an extraordinary thing happened. She was holding her saucer in one hand and lifting her coffee-cup to her lips with the other. Suddenly both her hands seemed to lose all power, to become nerveless, dead things. They dropped down. He saw them hanging at her sides, the cup and saucer smashed to fragments on the floor. A dark stain of coffee disfigured the front of her grey gown. For a moment he did not move. He was frightened. He did not feel at all as if he had seen a trifling accident, but as if he had been abruptly brought face to face with some tragedy of illness. Then he sprang up.

'How stupid of me,' she said indifferently. 'Just ring for Alice, will you?'

He rang the bell.

'Your dress is awfully spoilt, I 'm afraid,' he said, still feeling frightened.

'Oh, it doesn't matter.'

Evidently she did not mind at all. The waiter came in.

'Take that away, please,' she said, pointing to the broken china; 'and ask my maid to come to me for a minute.'

The waiter looked at the china, then at Mrs. Ismey, and afterwards at Felix. There was an expression of almost abject surprise on his face. Felix noticed it and thought how odd, how very unnatural it was. The lad knelt down, collected the china, and went out, still looking stupid with amazement.

'How—what happened?' Felix said. 'You aren't——'

'My hands were cold,' she replied, interrupting him. 'Oh, Alice, just wipe my gown, will you?'

She sat down as she spoke.

The maid had appeared at the door. She came forward, took out of her pocket a silk handkerchief, bent down, and wiped the place where the ugly stain was. When she had finished she looked at Felix for a moment, and went out of the room without a word. He stared after her.

'What an odd girl Alice is,' he said.

'Why odd?'

'I don't know. But she looks as if there was a lot in her.'

'I think I know what it is,' he said. 'The air here is so strong that it upsets you at first, because you hardly ever get any air.'

'Perhaps it is that.'

'You 'll come out with me this afternoon.'

'I 'll see.'

She did not speak either gaily or reluctantly, but with a sort of odd indifference, as if she hardly heard him. And this made him more determined to take her out and make her drink in the tonic of the wind.

'Now you are to come out,' he said, about half an hour after lunch.

He had been smoking, while she sat in an armchair by the fire with half-closed eyes, talking to him listlessly as if her mind were intent all the time on something far away.

'But it 's so windy,' she said.

'All the better. The tide 's a good way down and the sand is as hard as a billiard-table. Do come. You 'll love it.'

'Very well,' she answered. 'And I 'll tell Alice she can go out too.'

She went upstairs, and came down in about ten minutes with a fur coat on and a thick veil tied over her face.

'But you 'll be suffocated in that!' Felix said.

'No, I shan't.'

'And, besides, I can't see you. Do take it off.'

Now he had begun to exercise authority over her he became rather intoxicated by his sense of manly power. When she obeyed him she seemed to belong to him.

'But the light hurts me.'

'Only at first. You 'll get accustomed to it. I 'm really going to reform you. Now I 'm with you in the wilds I begin to understand how wrongly you live.'

He spoke almost chaffingly, but he was speaking what he felt to be the truth. She lifted her hands and slowly took off the veil. He saw that since she had been upstairs she had put more powder on her face.

'You want the wind,' he said, looking at her with a sort of critical and half-rebuking tenderness.

They set out towards the sands.

The sea was a good way down and the tide was falling. Long lines of surf chased each other before the wind, were shredded out into spare, tattered edges of white, faded in shallow water, and were succeeded by other anxious waves, whose turn for death had come. Seagulls flew sideways low in the sky.

On the horizon there was a faint lemon colour against the grey.

'Isn't it splendid?' Felix said.

Mrs. Ismey was walking rather feebly, bending forward to meet the wind, and sinking at each step in the soft shingle which preceded the firm sands. She looked like a person struggling to perform an unaccustomed feat, rather pathetically incapable.

'Do take my arm,' Felix said.

'I——'

Her low voice was lost in the wind, but she took it. They gained the hard sand and walked on more easily. Felix did not speak again for some time. The touch of her hand, the warmth of her arm against his stirred him and made him wish for silence. He felt his strength and her weakness of body, and longed to put his arm round her. His love suddenly became physical, startlingly so. At that moment for the first time he sinned in desire against Mr. Ismey. It seemed to him that she must know that he had sinned, and he looked down at her, half expecting to see in her face her knowledge. The wind seemed to have accentuated her features. Her cheek bones looked more prominent, her eyes more hollow than usual. There was a dark, bluish tint beneath them. Her lips were pale and shut firmly together, and her whole aspect was piteous and compressed.

'I believe you hate this,' Felix said.

'It's too windy,' she answered. 'It tires me. Let us turn back.'

He obeyed her in silence. His feeling of power had left him. Her weakness governed his—could he call it strength?

As soon as they were in the hotel once more she went upstairs, saying she would come down to the public drawing-room almost directly. Felix went in there to wait for her. The two sisters, whom he had seen at dinner, were sitting by the fire knitting in two armchairs. As he came in they glanced up at him, looked at each other, and dropped their prominent eyes upon their balls of worsted. Their faces were grim, as if they had just seen something shocking. He took up a paper, sat down at some distance from them by the window, which looked out on the road of shingle and the sands beyond, and pretended to read. In reality he was wondering what the lives of such women were like. Some, many minutes passed, yet Mrs. Ismey did not come down. He began to feel restless, presently almost angry. All the morning she had been secluded.

sant bending forward, the incessant staring which the flying sand-grains made so painful.

'We shall never find it in this wind,' he said. 'The sand must have blown over it and hidden it. Do give it up.'

'I won't!' she exclaimed bitterly. 'I tell you I must find it.'

'But——'

She turned on him savagely.

'How can I look when you interrupt me?' she cried out. 'Go to the hotel and find Alice. Send her here. If she isn't in, wait till she comes in, and send her at once. Go, go!'

Felix went away without another word. He felt as if she had struck him, hurt to the soul. He was utterly confused by her manner, and the fierce wind added to his confusion and misery. When he reached the hotel, he asked the waiter if Mrs. Ismey's maid had come in.

'No, sir,' said the lad. 'She hasn't been gone out long.'

'Please tell me directly she comes in, directly—mind.'

'Yes, sir.'

He paused, then added with evident curiosity:

'Can't the lady find it?'

'Has she told you?' said Felix.

'Yes, sir, and the housemaid. She's turned out all her room, and I've been all over the stairs to see for it. I s'pose it's worth a lot. I never see a lady in such a taking. Why, she seems pretty near crazed.'

'I'm in the billiard-room when the maid comes in,' said Felix curtly.

He went there, sat down on the divan which skirted the end of the room, and waited. A long time passed. It was actually an hour, but it seemed to him like a whole afternoon. All the time he waited he listened to the wind. He felt like a man who has received a wound in the dark, and who does not know its exact nature or why he has received it. He did not think much, but he suffered a great deal, and he felt as if he were on the edge of greater suffering, and as if he were also on the edge of complete understanding. He would see the wound in the light, would probe it himself, would know why he had received it. He was certain of that. All the rest was uncertainty.

'You wished to see me, sir?' said a faint voice.

Felix started. Alice was standing there, dressed in a plain black hat and jacket, and looking at him with her small, steady eyes.

'Oh—yes.'

He got up.

'Mrs. Ismey is out on the beach.'

'By herself, sir?'

Alice looked very much surprised.

'She wants you to go to her at once. She's lost something.'

'Lost something, sir? What is it?'

'A cigarette-case that Lady Caroline——'

Felix stopped short. Alice's face had suddenly changed. She looked alarmed. Felix came nearer to her.

'Alice,' he said, 'what is really the matter? You know and you must tell me.'

He spoke authoritatively, not curiously. He could not tell why, but this matter, apparently so trivial, loomed upon him now like something large, terrible, of profound importance.

'Oh, sir,' the maid answered, 'surely you can guess by this time!'

There was pity, but there was also something like contempt in her voice.

'Guess!' said Felix. 'What do you mean? What is there to guess?'

Alice hesitated.

'I'm sure I wouldn't give my lady away,' she murmured at length, 'not for anything. But—well——'

She stopped.

'Tell me,' Felix said. 'Tell me.'

'Why, sir, Mrs. Ismey keeps her morphia in that cigarette-case. If she don't find it I shall have an awful time with her to-night.'

'You—you liar!' said Felix passionately. 'You liar!'

He raised his hand as if he were going to strike her. But suddenly a floodgate seemed to be burst open in his brain and to set free a torrent of memories. His hand dropped to his side.

'I beg your pardon, Alice,' he said.

He went over to the billiard-table, rested his elbows on it, and hid his face in his hands. Two burning tears forced themselves between his eyelids.

Something within him, far away in a dark place, something inexorable kept saying to him, 'It's true, it's true.'

CHAPTER XXVI

LATE that evening, long after the dinner-hour had passed, and the two sisters had glided sideways from their table to take up again their knitting in the public drawing-room, Felix was walking heavily on the sands in the direction of the hotel. He had been out alone for hours, he did not know how many. He did not realise now what time of night it was, scarcely even that it was night. But he knew it was very dark and very cold, and that the wind was howling. He knew, too, that the lights which he saw in the distance shone in the house from which he had fled when Alice hurried out of the billiard-room. Yes, his going had been a flight. He had stumbled down the corridor, turning his face to the wall, almost like a child, when he came upon the waiter, who stared after him with a sort of sheepish amazement. Mechanically he had caught up his cap from the peg on which it was hanging, and had seized the handle of the hall door. It was a patent handle. He tried to turn it in vain. He struggled with it, striving to keep back the scalding tears which mounted to his eyes as if from some reservoir of bitter waters hidden deep in his heart. Then he heard the heavy patter of the waiter's feet coming along the passage and made some frantic movement. The door burst open. He felt the wind on his face, down which the tears were running despite his efforts to drive them back to their sources; and he fled, keeping his eyes turned away from that dreadful searching figure on the beach, fled past the bungalows with their closed shutters, and the lifeboat shed, and the fishermen's cottages, in front of which lay brown nets weighted down with stones from the slope of shingle. He skirted a sandbank, and the place to which he had travelled so eagerly only the day before was hidden. He was alone with the grey sky, the grey sea, and the truth.

He faced them desperately, almost brutally. He stared upon the truth as a man staring at a hideous naked figure, marking every ugly blemish, every revolting detail. And presently the truth seemed to hypnotise him as an object presented con-

tinuously to the eyes hypnotises the gazer. He knew that he was still looking at the truth, but it changed. Sometimes it seemed enlarged, sometimes diminished. Sometimes it vanished. Yet it was there, like a dreadful thing concealed for a while by gathering darkness.

He walked on and on along the lonely sands, and at first he was filled with a vague intention. He meant to get away from the hotel, to put ever-increasing stretches of sand between him and it, and that which was going to happen in it to-night. The maid's last words haunted his mind. Their simplicity, their colloquial vulgarity made their power. Each time he thought of them, repeated them to himself, his imagination conjured up some fresh scene of terror. He saw that which had been his holy of holies turned into something dreadful as a brothel, filthy as a church which human deeds have made a shambles.

And then he hastened, and was again conscious that he was in flight.

The darkness came down and the tide began to flow. He heard its voice in the night coming up the sands slowly, persistently, but he heard it like a partially deaf man. His senses seemed to him to have been injured by the knowledge which had come upon him. He remembered reading once in a newspaper of a great explosion which had made some men blind, others deaf, others speechless. Surely he was one of those men. He touched himself and fancied that even his sense of touch was affected. Then he burst out laughing all alone in the dark. How ridiculous life was! He went on and on. Perhaps he would have walked on all night had he not presently come to a river which found its way into the sea a few miles from Eldon Sands. He had set his feet in the water before he knew that there was a barrier to his further progress.

The river was wide at its mouth and flowed rapidly. Here and there its current was diverted by low sandbanks, and there was a scurry of foam where it met the advancing waves of the sea. Gulls were flying low over the waters, and far off the red eye of a lightship winked. Felix stood still looking at the river which forcibly changed his purpose. The farthest thing that he could see or imagine was the red eye of the lightship, and, for a moment, all he felt was that he wished to be on the other side of the river able to pursue his journey towards it. Surely it was at the end of the world, and beyond it there was nothingness, the precipitous darkness of annihilation.

But there was the river. He drew back and turned round, setting his face towards the other darkness in which Eldon

He drank the second glass of wine. She was silent for a moment. Then she said:

'But I always do. Why not?'

He got up and rang the bell without answering her.

'Bring me a glass of brandy, please,' he said, when the waiter came.

'A liqueur glass, sir?'

'Yes. And you can take away. I shan't eat anything more.'

'Yes, sir.'

He came to the fire and stood there in silence till the waiter brought the brandy. Mrs. Ismey did not say anything either. When Felix had drunk the brandy the waiter began to clear away. He was rather slow, but at last he had finished, gone out and shut the door. Then Felix said:

'Look here—I know.'

He spoke in a hard, unboyish voice, looking straight into the fire.

'Know!' Mrs. Ismey said. 'What do you mean? Are you angry with me because I sent you in to fetch Alice this afternoon?'

'I know that you take morphia,' he said.

Mrs. Ismey began to laugh, as if she were really amused.

'My dear boy! Why, what——'

'Stop that!' he said brutally. 'How dare you laugh?'

In the last sentence his voice lost its hardness and began to quiver.

'I can't bear it,' he said. 'I can't bear it! If you laugh I shall—I shall——'

He stopped speaking and clenched his hands together. Sobs rose in his throat, but he choked them down. He heard a sharp rustle, as Mrs. Ismey got up from her chair, and felt two hands laid on his arm.

'Oh don't—don't!' he said brokenly.

'But, Felix, you are mad——'

Suddenly he looked down at the hands that were holding him. They were filthy. He seized them.

'Look!' he said. 'Look! and don't tell me any more lies.'

She stood there staring at her hands, which he held up near to her eyes. He let go of them at last and they dropped to her sides.

'Don't tell me any more lies,' he repeated. 'I love you.'

He had never thought that if he told her his secret he would tell it like that. She moved away from him, sank down in the chair from which she had just got up, and began to cry, weakly, despairingly, almost as a baby cries when it is feeble from

suffering which it cannot express in words. Presently he looked down at her. She had partially turned in the big chair, so that she had one shoulder against the back of it, and her face pressed sideways upon the cushion. Her body shook slightly. Those horrible hands, protruding from the sleeves of her pretty gown, lay palm downwards against her knee with the black nails exposed. He looked at them and repeated with wonder:

'Yes, I love you.'

How could that be true, that thing incredible? And yet it was true. He did love her, now, at this moment. And he had presumed to think that he understood men, women, perhaps even himself. She went on crying. Presently she moved one of her hands, and began to feel at the back of her gown. She drew out a tiny pocket-handkerchief edged with lace and put it up to her eyes. He smelt perfume, the same curious perfume he had smelt when he drove with her and Lady Caroline in the brougham to the Standard Music Hall. It had given him dreams then. It filled him with remembrances now. While he looked at her he saw something gleam in the front of her dress. He bent, then knelt quickly down on the floor by her and put up his hand to her bosom. She turned sharply and clasped her two hands over his.

'What are you doing?' she said between her sobs. 'No—no——'

But he overcame her with his greater strength, drew the cigarette-case from its hiding-place, and thrust it into his pocket. When he came into the hotel he had not known what he was going to do, he had not known even fully what he felt. Now, suddenly, he knew, knew how much he loved her, in what course his love would lead him.

'Give it me back,' she said, with a sort of broken fierceness. 'Give it me back!'

'No,' he said.

She was sitting up in the chair, leaning forward to him with her hands stretched out.

'It's mine,' she said. 'You can't keep it. I will have it.'

He went to the window, opened it swiftly, and flung the cigarette-case far out into the darkness. She had followed him and uttered a cry which sounded like a cry of despair. Just then the door was opened and Alice came in. She heard Mrs. Ismey's exclamation.

'Oh, ma'am, what is it?' she said, coming quickly forward.

'He's thrown it away!' Mrs. Ismey cried out, in a terrible sharp voice.

and her body all gooseflesh, as you may say, and screaming out that there was ice in her very bones. And sometimes she'd yawn—that was awful, sir—for hours at a time, and nothing could stop it. Her face was that twisted up she didn't look herself. Her own husband wouldn't have known her. She might have been any old woman. And then she'd seem as if she was going right out. That was when the circulation went wrong. She'd be all in a sweat from top to toe, and nearly suffocating. I had to hold her up on the pillows like you might a baby. And there was other things, worse than that, that I couldn't tell to a gentleman. But it was hell for my poor lady, sir, that it was. Mr. Ismey he went away at last. He couldn't stand it, hearing her crying and shrieking out for the morphia hour after hour. The doctors made him go. And doesn't she hate him now for what she went through? Sometimes, I think, if she could get the chance, she'd kill him, and I believe he knows it too.'

Alice was silent. She looked through the doorway into the corridor, listened, then got up and stepped out. Felix watched her in silence. He felt stupid, like a man who has overtaxed his brain by work.

'I thought I heard her, sir,' said Alice, coming back. 'But it must have been fancy.'

'Wasn't she cured?' Felix asked with an effort.

'Just for the time, sir. But now it's as bad as ever, and worse, as if the being without had given her an appetite as you may say. I don't know what to do with her. The dirt is something dreadful, and tearing her dresses to pieces, and the breaking most everything she touches. Why, even the servants here are asking what it is. And she don't care now whether the needle's clean or not. She's in a shocking state, sir. She couldn't never wear a low dress again. And her money—why, she's borrowed even of the men-servants to pay that chemist where she goes in Wigmore Street. And now, as often as not, when she takes the morphia she'll leave the needle in. She never used to do that.'

'Leave it in? But—no, never mind. Don't tell me.'

He began to feel physically sick. Alice looked at him with compassion.

'It used to turn my stomach, sir, too,' she said. 'And no wonder.'

'But Lady Caroline?' Felix asked. 'She doesn't—does she take morphia?'

'Lord, yes, sir, regular. Why, it was she put my lady on to it at the first.'

'Ah, it was she!'

A flash of happiness, almost of triumph, came to him. After all Mrs. Ismey had sometimes told him the truth!

'Yes, sir. But her ladyship's quite different from my lady, and only takes a little, just the same each day, and never increases. And my lady wouldn't have any one know what she's after, not for all the world. But her ladyship almost glories in it, as you might say. If she had her way she'd make every one do as she does. Why, she's taught her maid, Mrs. Smart, to inject the filthy stuff. And the dog—but you've seen the dog, sir?'

'The dog!' Felix said. 'Chicho—d'you mean Chicho?'

A feeling of horror came over him such as he had not felt before.

'Yes, sir.'

'But what? Go on, go on, I tell you!'

'Her ladyship gives it to the dog, sir, regular.'

Felix had become deadly pale. He got up hastily, went over to the window, threw it open and leaned out. The strong sea air blowing upon his face, the wide darkness that held the sound of the sea, the knowledge of night, nature, stars, eternal things that came to him as he pushed aside man's barrier, one of the many which he sets up between him and that which he cannot understand, were so blessed to Felix just then that he longed to be one with the mysteries of God, to be dead for ever to the mysteries of men. But, almost like the unborn child in the womb of the mother, the love stirred in his heart, as if it stretched itself, pushed softly against the surrounding walls.

He turned back into the room. Alice was just going out at the doorway.

'I hear her, sir!' she whispered to him. 'She's coming down. I thought she would.'

Felix held up his hand to stop her, and went quickly over to her.

'D'you hear, sir?' she whispered.

Felix listened, and heard a very faint, stealthy noise, a creak of wood yielding beneath some light pressure, and then, in a moment, another sound which he did not understand.

'She's pulling back the bolts, sir! Let me go!'

The maid darted out into the blackness of the corridor.

There was a sound of struggling, then of a loud shrill screaming. Felix put his hands over his ears, and turned his back to the open door.

But that child of his stirred again in its prison.

He dropped his hands and followed Alice.

He shot his cuffs, and stroked his red-brown moustaches and whiskers with large nervous hands.

'Patience, Mr. Wilding, patience is what we want. The strong man is ever patient. Is not that so?'

'I dare say,' said Felix.

'Look at Carlyle, at Mr. Browning, and many another. Did they reach the goal at once? No, no. And should we, you and I, Mr. Wilding, be——'

'Look here, Chalmers,' Felix suddenly interrupted, in an odd, hard voice. 'Some time ago I met King Marshall.'

'Mr. Marshall, the celebrated writer of books, Mr. Wilding?'

'Yes. And d'you know what he said to me, what advice he gave me about life? He said: "Try to see what is and to think about it naturally."'

'My idea precisely, Mr. Wilding, my constant endeavour.'

'Look the truth in the face. That's what we've got to do. Look it in the face for others, but most especially for ourselves.'

Most certainly, Mr. Wilding. I am of the same opinion, I do assure you.'

'Well, and Antonino Marza said to me another day: "Don't think yourself bound to do anything that you hate. Every time we do anything that we hate we do ourselves an injury."'

'No doubt, Mr. Wilding, no doubt of it at all.'

'Ah, but don't you see that King Marshall and Marza are in conflict?'

'Two such great men, Mr. Wilding! Oh, surely impossible!' exclaimed Chalmers, beginning to look confused, and to pat the tablecloth with his bony fingers.

'Yes, they are, for to three-quarters of us there is nothing more hateful than looking the truth in the face. Which of us does it? Which of us is not afraid to do it?'

'Oh, I hope not, Mr. Wilding, I hope not, truly.'

'Chalmers,' said Felix, with a hot earnestness which startled his guest, 'I've seldom known what the truth is in my life, and sometimes, when I have, I've turned my back on it. I've glozed it over. But something's just happened—never mind what—which has changed me most awfully, and changed me for ever. I don't know a bit what it's made, or going to make of me, but I do know that King Marshall must be right and Marza wrong. We've no business to shut out from us everything that we hate, never to do what we hate doing, when to do it would make what is true clearer. Now I've done that before and I meant to do it to-night.'

'I beg pardon, Mr. Wilding?'

'I meant to gloze over the truth with you.'

'Indeed, Mr. Wilding! May I ask how so?'

Chalmers drummed more feverishly upon the tablecloth, and rolled his great eyes anxiously. Felix glanced at him and then looked away. If he had not been suffering so much himself he could not have gone on, but to-night he felt a sort of desperate desire to torture himself still more in the cause of truth. He was full of a wild, an almost frantic horror of lies. He knew he had originally invited Chalmers to dine with some vague intention of buoying him up with soothing words. Liar! He called himself that now as he thought of this intention, and he put it aside with a sort of angry vehemence.

'Chalmers,' he said, 'I'm going to hurt you. You'll have to forgive me. I've been hurt myself by the truth before now. Tell me, since you left Sam's you haven't got on, have you?'

Chalmers's strange and violent face began to twitch, but he still strove to preserve his rather extravagant air of leonine intellectuality.

'We must give it time, Mr. Wilding,' he began, with a sweep of the hand. 'We must——'

'You haven't got on!'

Chalmers sat back in his chair. An abrupt, piteous expression came into his eyes.

'Well, no, truly, Mr. Wilding,' he said, looking down.

'Honestly, do you think you ever will? do you think you are fitted to?'

'I—I—certainly I—we all have our moments of doubt, Mr. Wilding, but we must not give way to them. All great men——'

'Yes. But you and I aren't great men, Chalmers, and we know it. We are small men, very small.'

He spoke the last words with a bitter emphasis. Chalmers was silent. He sat there with both his large, knotted hands lying on the table on either side of his plate. His face looked suddenly old and desperate.

'Mr. Wilding,' he said at last, in a loud and faltering voice, 'I can't go back to tuning, I really can't. My soul turns right from it, that it does. I may not be as gifted as some——'

'Do you think you are gifted at all,' Felix interrupted, 'for literature?'

'Don't the love of it mean something, Mr. Wilding?'

'The love of a thing doesn't necessarily mean that one is gifted to understand it. I know that well.'

'I can't go back to the tuning, Mr. Wilding, I really can't!' Chalmers repeated, with a sort of terror which, to some people,

might have seemed ludicrous, considering its cause, but which was not ludicrous to Felix.

'Isn't it better to do the thing one can do well than to try to do the thing one has no power to do?' said Felix.

Afterwards at a great crisis he remembered saying those words, and grew hot with shame at his own ignorance of himself, at his audacity in daring to speak as he spoke that night to Chalmers.

'Chalmers,' he continued, 'you'll never succeed as a writer. Sam knows it, the whole school knows it, and you know it too. That's truth. Look it in the face.'

Chalmers dropped his head till his chin touched his breast.

'Then am I to go back, Mr. Wilding?' he said huskily. 'Am I to go back truly to tuning?'

If anything could have seemed strange to Felix after the last night at Eldon Sands, that evening's intimate talk with Chalmers would have seemed strange. He would formerly have thought it impossible that two human beings so different could have been brought into such complete accord for a time merely because each was stricken by sorrow. The barrier having been broken down Chalmers revealed to its depth his hitherto secret misery at his own utter incompetence for the career to which all his ambition flowed. He was grotesque in revelation, but he was so sincere that Felix was not conscious of that. They talked for a long time, and Felix, while giving sympathy, felt as if he were receiving it. He wondered afterwards at that, for he did not reveal his sorrow, did not tell Chalmers that there seemed to him that night to be a mighty cloud in the room, a cloud in which lights were dim and even sounds were muffled. At last, when the clocks were striking twelve, Chalmers got up to go. Drops of perspiration stood on his forehead. He wiped them away with the red silk handkerchief.

'I'm afraid I've kept you very late, Mr. Wilding,' he said apologetically. 'But—well, I do get carried away so by any kindness. I'm sure I ask pardon.'

Felix felt a lump rise in his throat. He choked it down.

'It's all right, Chalmers,' he said. 'But about kindness—that's utter rot. I feel as if I'd been rather a brute to you.'

'Telling me the truth. Well, sir——'

'Don't call me "sir"!'

'Mr. Wilding, truth is sometimes hard, and no mistake about it. To face the tuning again——'

He had on his overcoat, and was holding the big top-hat in

his hand. His feverish eyes stared fixedly at Felix with a sort of haggard appeal.

'It ain't—aren't much to look forward to in a lifetime truly,' he said.

Felix felt the hopelessness of many men's lives very strongly at that moment. He was just going to speak, to make some perhaps floundering attempt at honest and common-sense consolation, when there came a tap at the door.

'Come in!' said Felix, startled at any one's wishing to speak to him so late at night.

The door opened and the night porter appeared.

'Excuse me for interrupting you, sir,' he said, 'but there 's a woman downstairs wishing to speak to you.'

'A woman!'

He thought of Alice.

'Did she give any name?'

'Yes, sir, the name of Mrs. Blake.'

'Mrs. Blake?'

For a moment Felix did not remember that he knew any one of that name. Then suddenly he thought of Happy Hal, and his thin, piteous little wife. It must be she. But what could she want? Why did she come to see him at midnight?

'Ask her to come up,' he said to the porter.

'Yes, sir.'

'And just take this gentleman down with you in the lift.'

He shook hands warmly with Chalmers.

'Do come and see me again,' he said.

'Oh, thank you, Mr. Wilding. I will truly.'

The porter had left the room. Chalmers was already near the door.

'And—I say, Chalmers, the truth is hard, I know, and bitter to face, but don't think you 're the only one that 's got to show courage. There 's something very bad in front of me too.'

'I 'm sorry, Mr. Wilding.'

'And—well, Chalmers, I fancy that everybody who shows courage gives courage to others. Don't you think so? Let 's both try to have pluck.'

'I will try, Mr. Wilding. Thank you kindly. I 'm sure I shall never forget——'

He stopped speaking, stood for a moment, then threw up his head with the old leonine air and strode out of the room.

'Poor chap!' Felix muttered.

He felt sincerely grateful to Chalmers, for, in trying to help

him, he had certainly helped himself, in confronting the sorrow of another he had gained in power to confront his own.

'Mrs. Blake, sir,' said the night porter's voice.

There was a pause. Then Happy Hal's wife crept, rather than walked, sideways into the room, with her head drooped and her eyes fixed on the carpet. The night porter stared after her with bluff surprise, went out and shut the door.

'Mrs. Blake,' said Felix. 'I 'm glad to see you. Do please sit down. What is it?'

He held out his hand, but Mrs. Blake did not take it. Perhaps she did not see it. She looked thinner, more meagre, more plaintively respectable than ever. She wore a small black bonnet, and a black shawl pinned across her flat chest. Remaining where she was, close to the shut door, she dropped a curtsey. Her hands were hidden under the shawl, but by a slight, continuous movement of it Felix knew that they were trembling.

'There 's nothing wrong, I hope?' he said quickly.

A thin sound came from the little woman. It was almost like the whimper of a small dog.

'Come and sit down by the fire and tell me what it is,' Felix said.

He put his hand gently on Mrs. Blake's arm and led her to a chair. She sat down modestly on the edge, swallowed, and then said in a low, formal voice, which quivered once or twice and almost broke:

'I 'm fair ashamed, sir, to come and disturb a gentleman at this time of night.'

'Nonsense. I 'm glad to see you. How is your husband? All right, I hope?'

Mrs. Blake swallowed again. Felix could see her throat, which seemed to him almost as narrow as a bird's throat, working.

'Sir, it 's—it 's Hal as I 've come abo[illegible] answered, after a moment.

'He 's not ill?'

Suddenly Mrs. Blake broke dow[illegible]n to cry softly. Even her grief was strangely subd[illegible]spectable. Te[illegible] rolled down her thin cheeks to h[illegible]chin, and dr[illegible] off on to the black shawl.

'What is it? Try to tell [illegible] I can d[illegible] I will.'

'It 's Hal, sir,' she said [illegible]ulping d[illegible] 'I 'm in great trouble abou[illegible]

'He is ill, then?'

'No, sir, but—but it all come about just as ever—as ever I thought it would. Why did we go from Dover? Why did we go from Dover?'

The tears ran down again.

'He's got into difficulties?' asked Felix. 'But I thought he was doing splendidly. I saw his name on the bills at the Palace. I've been meaning to come and see him, but—well, I've had so many things.'

'It isn't money, sir. No, sir, it's—it's the drink.'

'The drink!' exclaimed Felix. 'You don't mean to say that Hal's been drinking?'

'Drinking something dreadful, sir. I always was afraid for him, sir. And I was right. It come on gradual like. I won't say as it was his fault. But they was always wanting to treat him, one and another. You see, sir, his being a famous man, as you may say——'

'I know.'

'Well, they pretty nigh made him drink whether he was that way or not. And the end of it was he got a taste for it, and ever since it's been something shocking. I've had to send the children away, back to my mother at Dover, for I couldn't have them there to see—to see——'

Her voice was drowned in sobs.

'And we always so respectable!' she murmured through them. 'Up till now.'

Felix felt deeply sorry for her, but his chief sensation was one of sheer amazement. He thought of Hal, of his resolute, serene face, his straightforward eyes. Mrs. Blake's assertion seemed incredible. Yet it must be true. Her grief was painfully genuine.

'I'm [illegible] he said [illegible]ly sorry. I never could have believ[illegible]r hu[illegible]d fall into that.'

[illegible]afra[illegible].'

[illegible]x re[illegible]w he had mentally laughed at [illegible]rs [illegible]her's, how he had pitied poor, [illegible]heeks getting hot.

[illegible], eager to get away from his [illegible]ned to-night?'

[illegible]have ventured to——'

Felix interrupted, 'your husband [illegible]n. If I can do anything I shall be [illegible]pologise. What's the matter?'

[illegible]en trying to keep Hal straight by

CHAPTER XXVIII

MRS. WILDING wrote often to Felix. She spoke in her letters of the dawning of spring. She said that the dreariness of winter was passing. She did not beg him to come home, but in her descriptions of the growing charms of the country was only half hidden her yearning to see her son. If he would not come to be with her, perhaps he would come to see the earliest flowers beginning to peep out in the brown earth. As a little child Felix had loved the spring. The ferment of nature had been reflected in his youthful heart and brain. Mrs. Wilding remembered it. She remembered indeed everything connected with her children. And now, in her letters, she alluded to the old times, to spring expeditions in search of the first violets, the first periwinkles, to the emulation between Felix and Margot as to who would find the first primrose of the year, to their joy and interest in the young lambs.

But Felix confronted the void. Out of the darkness there came to him cries that were as the cries of helpless, storm-driven creatures being hurled towards terrible abysses. He seemed to see pale, frantic hands raised in wild gestures of appeal. The pity of the world—he really meant London when he said to himself the world—got hold of him. It was as if he sat upon some dominating height and contemplated it, as if no one but himself had ever contemplated it before. Face to face with the tragedy of Mrs. Ismey, the tragedy of himself, his mother's letters struck him as decidedly trivial. All this talk about the prettiness of spring, all these old, childish memories roused little interest, little emotion in the serious man who was waking to a strange knowledge of the frivolous, ignorant boy that he had been. Of course his mother could not be expected to realise that the perennial changes in nature were matters of small moment to one who was diving deep into the tragedies of human beings. She lived apart from such tragedies. He thought of her almost as some elderly, good nun, cloistered in a calm retreat where nothing of danger, of evil could approach

to disturb the profound peace. She had time to meditate, time to watch a snowdrop come up, or a crocus lift its yellow head to the pale sun, time to tell him of these trivial and inevitable events which each new spring-time saw. But he had work to do in the world. He felt as if all London were calling on him for help, clamouring to him for assistance, and he wrote short answers to his mother's letters, and gave no hint of running down to see for himself the garden beauties she described. He said to himself that he must not leave his post even for a moment. From that hour of night when he followed Alice into the dark corridor of the hotel at Eldon Sands, his soul was concentrated on one thing, the rescue of Mrs. Ismey from the vice which governed her.

He found time to speak the truth to Paul Chalmers. He went with weeping Mrs. Blake to bail out her husband. He exerted himself to persuade Hal to give up the career which, though it brought riches to him, was bringing also destruction upon him. But, whatever he did that was not connected with Mrs. Ismey and with her vice, he did with a sort of dogged resolution, but without real, live energy. Gradually, while he contemplated the dark void, the vague crowds of helpless, storm-driven creatures grew pale as ghosts and vanished. He saw only one. Could he rescue her?

But first he had to rescue something else.

Among the horrors of that night of knowledge one stood out more vital than all the others. When Alice told him about Chicho, Felix went to the window. If he had not been able to get air at that moment he knew that he must have been ill. Even the crumbling of his beliefs, the realisation of the persistent and invariable deception which had been given to him where he came for truth, even the cruel blow upon his heart, could not turn his mind from the animal which was helplessly involved in this evil, deliberately forced to become what others at least chose to become, exercising their free will. That night when he leaned out, and met the wind, and saw the stars, he knew that he had to take Chicho away from Lady Caroline.

Felix loved animals. There were a few things which his imagination boggled at, things which he knew happened in the world, but which utterly puzzled him, because he was totally unable to conceive of the nature capable of bringing them about. One of these things was cruelty to a dog. When he read or heard about murders, even of a very foul kind, he felt that, however vaguely, he could in some degree imagine why

they had been committed. One human being can wrong another. Jealousies can arise between one human being and another for worldly reasons, for reasons of passion. The murderer he could conceive of, the vitriol-thrower even, the thief, the cheat, the deserter, the betrayer. But he could not conceive of the nature that can take pleasure in torturing a dog. And he always knew that, were he an autocrat, he would have the man who persecuted an animal strung up to the nearest tree.

So he knew that he had to take Chicho out of the power of Lady Caroline. He considered how he could do this. At first he thought of going to Great Cumberland Place, asking for Lady Caroline, telling her why he had come, and demanding the little dog. There would be a boldness in that, an audacity which might appeal to her. She was bold, audacious. But then, he thought, if she refused to part from Chicho? What could he do? And of course she would refuse. She would, perhaps, have him turned out of the house. Or she would merely laugh at him as a silly boy who was vapouring wildly in an effort to play Don Quixote. Would it be better to try to make her see the loathsomeness of what she was doing, the utter cowardice of it, the—yes, the pitiful dishonourableness of it? For a human being can be dishonourable to an animal. He might plead with her. But if she were capable of doing what she had done she must surely be incapable of understanding the horror of it. The morally blind cannot be made to see in a moment by a miracle. And Felix contemplated Lady Caroline in thought with immeasurable wonder. Her conduct to Chicho seemed to him inexplicable, opposed to her nature as he had read it. She was tyrannical, no doubt, careless of the world's opinion, selfish perhaps, vicious certainly. Her creed was 'each for himself.' She was disposed to let the weak go to the wall. She was even wicked, he supposed. For had she not led Mrs. Ismey into ruin while pretending to be her friend? Yet she had fineness in her, a true sense of honour. He could not doubt it after her silence under his attack upon her on behalf of Mrs. Ismey; her resolute preservation of the secret of her friend. How could such a woman, with all her evil faults, descend to such a depth? He did not know.

A doctor could have told him, any doctor who had studied the ravages of morphia in the modern world.

Felix was obliged to endure his ignorance and to wonder. That fact did not turn him from his purpose. He was going to rescue Chicho. And, at last, as it seemed to him likely,

almost certain, that any open, honest attempt to do that must be frustrated by Lady Caroline's indignant or laughing refusal to give up her victim, he resolved to steal the little dog. He knew this would be difficult, but he intended to do it, and, therefore, did not choose to allow to himself that it might be impossible. It was simply a thing that had to be done, therefore a thing that could be done. But how?

He had not seen Lady Caroline since the day when he lunched with her. Once he had been to Great Cumberland Place to leave his card. He resolved to go again. He did not know what he was going to do, how he meant to get hold of Chicho. But he wanted to be inside that house. It seemed to him that some opportunity might arise to carry out his purpose. He would learn, perhaps, when Chicho was let out for a run. The butler might tell him. Lady Caroline might drop a chance word. At any rate he would go. He resolved to be very much on his guard if Lady Caroline were at home. He would not allow her to suspect his discovery at Eldon Sands. If he did she might—he almost guiltily told himself this—suspect that he had some enmity against her, some secret purpose in coming to see her. So, full of cautious resolution, and beset by a strange feeling that he was something between a fine fellow and a criminal, he set out for Lady Caroline's house on the Wednesday after his return to town. He had not seen Mrs. Ismey since he returned, although she had followed him with Alice on Monday evening. But he had seen Alice once at his flat. Alice was in his pay now, and sworn to carry out his orders when possible, and to tell him if it were not possible to carry them out.

As he drew near to Lady Caroline's door he found himself walking furtively, with the step of a thief, he thought. And now that he was so close to the house which he intended to rob he began to realise more fully than before how extraordinary, how outrageous even, his intention was. Would it not be better to follow up his first idea, to tell Lady Caroline the whole truth, to trust to audacity and his own hot sincerity of feeling in this matter? Boldness, when complete, often means complete success. He knew this. But then he thought of Lady Caroline. She was not like other people. He could not imagine dominating her audacity with his. When he reached the house he was in a state of indecision, and he resolved to wait before deciding what to do. If she was at home he would make up his mind what course to take when he saw her. He rang the bell. The servant came. Her ladyship was at home. Felix scarcely knew whether he was glad or sorry. He felt very uneasy, and his

nerves were quivering with excitement as he followed the man into the boudoir on the ground floor.

'I will tell her ladyship you are here, sir,' said the man, going out and leaving him alone in the room.

He looked round. Now that he knew the truth of Lady Caroline and Mrs. Ismey, the room, which had always seemed to him strange, seemed to him horrible. The darkness of it—as before only one lamp with a red shade was burning, and the red curtains were already drawn—was evil, the aspect of disorder suggested to him the movements of delirium. He glanced at the great sofa near the fire, and imagined women lying upon it steeped in the false dreams, the brief and fading ecstasies of morphia. A low, dull sound made him start violently. He did not know what it was, and looked round quickly. The noise was repeated, and this time, being on the alert, he recognised it as the growl of a dog. It must be Chicho. In the flickering obscurity he did not see the little creature. He snapped his fingers and said, in a low voice, 'Chicho! Chicho!' He heard the growl again. It was louder now, and he was able to locate it. He went softly over to the corner of the room behind the big sofa and found Chicho lying there in his basket, which was half covered in with cane, and was lined with red flannel. His small body, thatched with thick, bristling, jet-black hair, looked almost like a dark shadow in the gloom. His chin was resting on the basket edge, and his glassy black eyes stared at Felix with a sort of dull surliness, while he growled again. Felix stood looking at him. He seemed weary and spiteful, scarcely wide awake, but just sufficiently conscious to be stirred by enmity. Felix bent down with the intention of touching him, stroking him, but Chicho drew back his lips, showing two rows of small teeth. And just then the man-servant returned.

'I'm sorry, sir,' he said. 'But I made a mistake. Her ladyship has gone out.'

'Oh,' said Felix.

He hesitated, looking at the man. It occurred to him that the opportunity to do what he intended to do had presented itself unexpectedly soon. He must grasp it.

'Perhaps I can write a note and leave it for Lady Caroline?' he said.

'Certainly, sir. You'll find writing materials here, sir.'

He showed a table near Chicho's basket.

'Thanks. Don't trouble to wait in the hall. I'll leave the note here and let myself out.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The man, who had waited on Felix when he dined and lunched with Lady Caroline, went softly out and closed the door, leaving Felix sitting at the writing-table. As soon as he had gone Felix wrote the following note:

'DEAR LADY CAROLINE,—I called to see you this afternoon, but have missed you. If you had been at home I might have asked you something. I don't know. As you are out I am venturing to follow my instinct. That tells me to become a thief and to steal Chicho. Do not look for him. You will not find him. I don't ask you to forgive me. I don't think there is much to forgive, really. You will understand why I have done this. But please believe that when I accepted your kind hospitality I did not know. FELIX WILDING.'

He was going to be a thief, but, at least, he would tell her that he was one. Some boldness in him went out to encounter hers. He put the note into an envelope, addressed it, laid it on the table, then went to the door, opened it slightly, looked out and listened. There was no sound. He could not see the whole of the hall, but apparently the servant had gone away. If not he must be waiting by the front door. That was possible. Felix resolved to make sure and went out softly. The man was not there. Felix returned quickly to the room and approached Chicho's basket. When he had first seen Chicho he remembered feeling that to touch the little dog would be horrible to him. Then he did not know the truth. Now that he did know it the sensation of horror was still very strong upon him, but with it was blended a sensation of pity which was stronger still.

'Chicho!' he said. 'Chicho!'

Chicho growled feebly, sulkily. Felix touched him. The black hair along the middle of his back bristled up, and he showed all his teeth as if he were going to bite.

'Chicho! Chicho!'

Felix put his left arm round the little dog and lifted him out of the basket swiftly. Chicho growled more fiercely, struggled, but lethargically as if his limbs were inert and refused to obey fully the angry temper that smouldered within him. He turned his head from side to side, and tried to set his teeth in Felix's hand. His writhing body made Felix almost sick as he felt it against his arm and side. He longed to drop Chicho, to get away from him and never to see him again. The dog was disgustingly unnatural. But he conquered his repulsion, hurried through the hall to the door, opened it with some difficulty and stepped into

of the drawing-room in Green Street. Would he ever be able to take her out with him into the air and the sun? Would she ever face the wind and the light of the open heavens fearlessly again?

He tried to coax Chicho out, but failed in the attempt. And a sort of heavy, leaden fear entered into his heart.

But in the morning he felt happier. The little dog looked, he thought, more natural, less malignant, less cowardly. Seeing him now in the daylight Felix noticed that he was horribly thin, and tried eagerly to make him eat. But he still refused food, though he feebly lapped a little water out of a saucer set down on the floor. Having done this he dragged himself again to the armchair, and concealed himself in the darkness beneath it. Only when he was in darkness did he seem to be at ease.

She was like that too. Felix began to realise the fact that morphia creates monsters, morphia-people to whom all that the healthy and the normal think of as natural is intolerable, morphia-people who flee the light like criminals, who flee the truth as if it were a consuming fire.

'Poor Chicho! Poor Chicho!' he said, as he saw the little dog cowering in the obscurity.

But he was thinking of her.

That morning at breakfast he had two letters, one from his mother and one from Lady Caroline. He opened the latter eagerly. It was very short:

'DEAR MR. WILDING,—Come to see me. Come either to-morrow morning at twelve, or to-morrow afternoon at four.

'CAROLINE HURST.'

What did she think of him? What did she intend to do? How would they meet? An intense excitement seized him, a desire to fight. He longed for action. In idleness he was haunted by the tragedy of his disillusion, by the spectres of the lies he had clung to, taking them for truths. Hope goes hand in hand with action. He resolved to be with Lady Caroline at twelve. Then he opened his mother's letter and read it slowly. When he had finished it he laid it down on the breakfast-table and sat for a long time. He scarcely knew what he was feeling; surprise, a sort of wonder which he knew to be ridiculous? His mother told him that Margot was shortly going to have a child. Margot was going to be a mother. Margot! Now he knew why he had been dimly conscious of a change in her. He understood the meaning of the expression which had come into Stephen's face, the very human expression. Margot—a mother!

He had been very close to her. Now, surely, he was very far away. She was walking along mysterious confines. He, too, was near to mystery, the mystery of his love, and pity, and forgiveness. His mother spoke of her anxiety. He was very conscious of that anxiety in reading the letter. Margot had never been particularly strong.

Suddenly Felix lost that sense of being very far away from his sister. He thought of her illness, her pain, almost as if they were going to be his own. He remembered that moment upon the landing before the marriage dinner; the anxious, tender look in his sister's intelligent, sensitive brown eyes. How grateful she had been to him. And why? Simply because he showed for a moment that she had meant something in his life; that her going left an empty space. Since her marriage, in his mind and heart he had almost ignored her. Now he was suddenly conscious that she was his sister, and that he had a feeling for her which he could never have for any other human being. When he thought of her suffering, perhaps dying, it was as if his flesh were thinking as well as his spirit.

They two had come from the same place, and they two alone of all the world.

Chicho whimpered in his hiding-place, and Felix remembered Mrs. Ismey. Was life opening out before him, or was death closing in about him? He did not know, but he seemed to be in steady movement towards a crisis. His mother's letter, the knowledge and the emotion it brought, accelerated the movement. She spoke in it of death, gently, sincerely, as if she had been thinking about it a great deal.

Felix threw the letter down on his writing-table almost impatiently. T'sh! Children were born into the world every day by thousands and the mothers lived. Of course Margot would live.

He did not mean to go to Sam's that day. He had Chicho to tend and Lady Caroline to see. His hand throbbed rather painfully. As the morning wore on Chicho showed great uneasiness and distress. He crept out from the darkness under the chair, and crawled about the room from corner to corner as if seeking blindly for something. His breathing was short and convulsive. There was a look of agony in his glassy eyes. At first he avoided Felix, but presently he came to him, squatted sideways on the floor near him, and stared up at him fixedly as if claiming something from him. He whined piteously and began to scratch the carpet with his fore-paws. His hind-quarters still seemed to be partially paralysed.

'Not then. It wasn't in me to care then.'

'Then!' he said. 'Why do you say "then"? It isn't in you to care now.'

'I don't know that,' she said. 'You remember the day you lunched with me?'

'Yes.'

'That day I wished I had let Valeria alone. I wished it badly.'

'But why that day?'

'Well, when you said "she trusts me," and I knew how much, I thought to myself that but for me she might never have told you all those lies. And all those lies seemed a pity, told to you.'

She spoke in her usual bluff, abrupt way. There was nothing tender in her voice, but she did not look at Felix.

'You're rather a good chap,' she added, after a slight pause. 'You can keep Chicho.'

'Lady Caroline,' he said, 'why aren't you a splendid woman?'

'Because I have no belief in to-morrow,' she said.

They were both silent. Felix felt clearly now what he had felt dimly before, that Lady Caroline would certainly have been a fine fellow—yes, just that—if she had not been such a rascal. The slang of his earnest, boyish thought suited her.

But Chicho?

'How could you do it to a dog?' he asked.

'I know. How could I? This book has told me. This doctor knows. I have my nature and my morphia-nature. My morphia-nature makes me pass on my—well, my addition to truth. I have to. The desire is irresistible.'

Her face changed. Felix thought it gleamed, as a red coal gleams when you fan it.

'But that is madness!' he exclaimed.

'Is it? Yes, I suppose it is. There's a good deal more madness abroad in modern life than most of us suspect. But I'm sane enough to let you keep Chicho, sane enough even to be glad you've got him.'

When they parted they shook hands.

'Promise me one thing,' Felix said as he was going.

'Well?'

'If you ever see her you'll—you'll go back on what you've done. You'll try to stop her?'

'D'you mean to say you could trust me to do that, if I promised?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'All right. But I shan't see her. Mr. Ismey would kill me if I did.'

'Mr. Ismey!'

'He 's a man.'

Her voice sounded something like a schoolboy's when she said that.

'And besides—you say you care for truth?'

'Yes, rather!'

'Then—it 's too late.'

Felix felt as if a stone fell upon his heart and crushed it. He made no answer and went out slowly.

When he got home he found that Chicho had eaten a morsel of food. The little dog whined feebly when he saw Felix, and crawled, almost eagerly, towards him.

'Chicho, get well, get well!' Felix whispered to him passionately.

He bent down and stroked Chicho with the hand the dog had bitten.

'Not as you do,' she answered, with a quick glance at him. 'With him it isn't what the woman does that matters, it's what his wife does.'

She had never told Felix plainly what she felt towards him, and he did not know. Sometimes he thought she loved him. Sometimes, more often, he thought she had become incapable of love, that morphia had affected not only her brain but her heart. Alice stood for the truth to him. The crude, hard determination to look truth in the face, even if his eyes were blinded by it, remained with him and did not falter. Through Alice he knew that Mrs. Ismey lied to him every day. Sometimes he wondered pitilessly how that feeling in his heart could continue to live on under the blows that fell perpetually upon it. Why could she not slay it? At moments he was ashamed of its incapacity for death. But there were other moments in which he gloried in that incapacity, and dreamed of her final salvation through it. Could not a love which was able to endure her lies, her constant, restless endeavour to trick it, her limitless deception, and those other horrors which come in the train of morphia: dirt, carelessness in dress, indescribable disorders of existence and of health, some of which cannot be wholly concealed—could not such a love conquer even such a tyranny as that of the *piqure*?

Alternately he hoped and he despaired.

He would not leave London.

Even the strange and tender thoughts which had come to him when he received his mother's news about Margot found no more footing in his mind. It seemed as if he had no longer any capacity which was not pressed into Mrs. Ismey's service. He strove for her and had no force for any other battle.

But one day he was utterly sick at heart. His love, his strife, everything seemed to him vain.

It was an afternoon of May, the month in which the birth of Margot's child was expected. The sun was shining brightly. The air was full of spring, even the air of the great city. The windows of Felix's flat were open, and the roar of the season's merry traffic in Victoria Street filled his little sitting-room. Chicho was curled up on the divan, dreaming comfortably with half-shut eyes; but Felix sat there alone, with his hands dropped down between his knees, staring at the carpet. He had never before felt so hopeless, so utterly wretched, not even when Alice told him the truth in the billiard-room at Eldon Sands.

All his endeavours had been useless. Mrs. Ismey's passion

for morphia was rapidly increasing. Alice found it hopeless to struggle with her, impossible to contend against her almost ape-like cunning.

'Unless she 's locked up, sir,' the maid had said to Felix, 'she 'll find the means to get the filthy stuff. She bribes the men-servants to bring it her when I 'm not by. She hides it in places you 'd never think to look in. It 's no use, sir. I can't keep her from it. I 'm tired out with trying, sir. I 've done my best and you know it, but I think I shall go.'

'Alice!' he exclaimed in despair.

The maid looked down. She was very pale, and there was a dogged expression on her face.

'I 'm sorry, sir,' she said, 'but I don't think I can stand it any longer. And—well, sir, there 's a young man who wishes to marry me.'

'Oh.'

'And he says he won't wait for me any more. I 'm sorry, sir, but I 'm afraid I shall have to go.'

'What will become of her?'

'Who 's to say, sir?'

So long as Alice remained with Mrs. Ismey Felix felt that at least there was some one perpetually near her who was fighting against her tyrant. But Alice was going. Her departure seemed the beginning of some fearful end.

'What am I to do?' he thought. 'What can I do?'

His brain was dull with misery, dull and heavy. The street noises sounded to him far off, and very sad. The soft spring sunshine on his face was like a sickly glare to him. Vaguely he felt that everything in humanity, everything in nature, was joyless, if not actually hideous. Helplessness and wickedness lay like a cancer at the heart of the world. He was tired out with it all. He was without strength. There was no efficacy in him. Dully, as he sat there in the sunshine, he thought of many things, like one at the end of a long and ill-spent life. He thought of his arrival in France, of his young eagerness in facing that which was new. What a boy he was then, and what a fool every boy is! Those keen feelings he had—they were dust flung by some malign Creator into the eyes of his heart. Yes, they were dust; dust the sadness that seemed beautiful; the romantic passion so vague, yet so strong; the longing to do some great deed, to help some one, to be kind or noble, that had flowed over his soul when he heard the water murmuring round the arches of the bridge, and the distant music on the wooded island, as the twilight sank to darkness. Then he

had longed to accomplish a great deed—now he had tried to do a small one. And how utterly he had failed. Dust! Dust!

He thought of his days in the forest. He saw it again as he sat there by Chicho. Bars of sunlight lay over the Chinese idols. With their narrow, satirical eyes they had watched the opening of that flower which was surely withering already, withering in the cruel spring. How he had longed for life, in the forest! The tailor had found life hard in Paris, but Felix had never thought it could be hard for him in London. He meant to do so much, to learn so much. And he had learnt that he was powerless to accomplish the only thing he cared for; and what had he done? He had saved a dog from an ugly fate, and had perhaps helped to save a man. For Chicho lay there dreaming happily, and Hal Blake, moved at last by the misery and prayers of his wife, and by the representations of Felix, perhaps too by his own natural good sense, which drink had not yet wholly drowned, having terminated the contract which bound him, had not entered into another. He had agreed to take a short holiday, and to go down to Dover to spend it with 'the kids.' Somehow Felix fancied that he would stay there. Once more in the old place, among the old 'pals,' with a happy wife and the children he had missed, once more by the familiar sea and the white cliffs, it was not unlikely that he would forget his brief spell of fame. And if he did not, perhaps he would be forgotten. Already he was less of a sensation than he had been, and his manager talked of his keeping out of London for a time and trying a tour of the provinces. To-day Felix chose to place him with Chicho in safety, and, contemplating them in thought, to say, 'That is what I have done.' And he said it bitterly. It was something, but how little. Dust! Dust!

The tailor had told him that, if he ever returned to the forest, he must come back and say that he was happy. That could never be. And, as he sat there, he thought that he would never go back to the forest, would never see the tailor again. To do so would surely be intolerable, even as the tailor's return from Paris had been intolerable. The tailor fled from the comments of the neighbours. Felix wished that he could flee from the comments of his own soul. Dust! Dust! Impotent creature! He thought of himself fired by Balzac with wild ambitions. Had he not been as the silly housemaid who is fired by the *Family Herald* with the ambition to wed an Earl? His flaming heart of old time seemed to him vulgar as an illuminated hovel,

in which the radiance reveals the decay, the emptiness, the grimy corners where the cobwebs hang.

He remembered the sound of the Angelus bell, and how it had struck in his fancy like a silver ray across the dusky fire of the lamps of Paris, and how, sitting in the ruined chapel of La Maison des Alouettes, he had been filled with terror at the idea of a calm God watching over the frantic and aimless activities of His creatures. Was there such a God? Was He looking down at Mrs. Ismey hiding the morphia needle beneath some fold of her torn gown, or sitting up in her disordered bed, when Alice slept, to feed her wounded body with the poison that was destroying it?

Why not? Such a God, so calm, would be a suitable figure-head for the irony of things.

Chicho moved, raised his black muzzle, growled. Felix, who had been bending forward, as despairing people do, lifted himself up with an effort. There was a tap at the door and his servant looked in.

'Will you see a lady, sir?'

'Who is it?'

The man handed him a card.

'Mrs. Francis Ismey.'

The card was covered with brown smears.

'Yes,' Felix said.

In two or three minutes Mrs. Ismey walked in. Felix saw at once that she was under the influence of morphia. She was dressed in a black gown, the skirt of which was caked with dry mud. Her hat was pushed on one side of her head. Her hair was untidy. She had no gloves on, and her hands were filthily dirty and covered with rings, whose jewels emphasised their degradation. Felix noticed that her boots were not properly buttoned and did not match. She was smiling dreamily as she came in. Her face was daubed with paint, very badly put on. She looked terrible; ill and fantastic, but contented, abominably contented in her dirt and disorder, as if she were a pretty woman exquisitely conscious of her own beauty, and of the perfection of her toilet.

Chicho barked violently when he saw her, as he would have barked at a tramp.

Felix laid his hand on the little dog and held him down. The servant stood for a moment by the door, staring at Mrs. Ismey with a faint and knowing smile. Then he went out. Chicho kept on barking furiously.

'A dog!' said Mrs. Ismey slowly. 'You've got a dog?'

Evidently she did not recognise Chicho. Felix picked him up and carried him out into the bedroom.

'What are you doing?' said Mrs. Ismey's voice behind him. 'What are you doing with that dog? Doggie! Doggie!'

Felix turned hastily round from Chicho, whom he had put down on the bed, and found Mrs. Ismey coming in at the door. There was still a smile on her painted face. She looked as if she were feeling sly and jocose, and were just about to do something which she considered funny and surprising.

Chicho's hair bristled up and he showed all his teeth. Felix laid his hand lightly on Mrs. Ismey's arm to lead her back to the sitting-room, but directly he touched her she shrank away as if she felt an intolerable pain.

'Don't!' she said. 'Don't!'

Felix had noticed recently that she could not endure him to clasp her bare hand. Once, when he had pressed it in meeting her, she had started violently, and immediately afterwards he had seen drops of perspiration rolling down her face. Now the smile had left her lips and her hands were shaking.

'I beg your pardon!' he exclaimed. 'Have I——?'

'It's brutal to do that to me!' she interrupted excitedly.

Her face was contracted.

'I brutal to you! But I scarcely touched you!'

'It hurts me to be touched!'

He did not understand how painfully sensitive the skin of the habitual morphia-taker becomes, but he saw that she had really suffered under his hand, and felt tender over her.

'Forgive me!' he exclaimed. 'Forgive me! You know it was an accident. I only want to save you from pain and suffering.'

'Pain and suffering—oh yes!'

They were in the sitting-room now. He shut the door.

'How dreadful this glare is!' she said.

'I'll pull down the blinds.'

He went over to the windows. Meanwhile she sat down on the divan, and stretched out her arms. She began to yawn. Felix drew down the blinds. They were white and did not shut out the sun very well. The room remained light.

'Will that do?' he asked.

She tried to stop yawning and to answer him, but could not. He glanced at her, saw what was happening, and looked down. There was a silence of two or three minutes, broken twice by attempts on her part to speak, attempts which were immediately smothered. At last she got up, still yawning, walked to the

window and back again. Her hat had fallen quite to one side. She kept on lifting and dropping her arms. Then she put up one hand to the front of her dress, and began trying to unbutton it with trembling fingers.

'Let me—let me get you something,' said Felix.

A rush of heat went over his body as if he stepped into a hothouse.

'Some tea?'

She nodded. She was still walking about. He rang the bell, and, when he heard the servant coming, hurried to the door and gave his order.

'As quickly as possible!'

'Yes, sir.'

He heard the man speaking to some one on the landing outside, and the sound of a laugh. A sort of desperation came into his heart, a longing for violent action. When he came back into the room Mrs. Ismey was sitting down again on the divan, leaning against the cushions as if she were utterly exhausted. She had stopped yawning. Her face had become extraordinarily inexpressive and rigid, and she seemed to know that it had, for when she saw Felix she made a violent, fleeting grimace, a sort of fierce muscular exertion to look normal.

'We shall have the tea in a moment,' he said, trying to speak easily.

'How cold it is to-day!' she replied, in a dull voice.

'But it's the hottest day we've had!'

'No, it's bitter, like winter.'

She shivered. He noticed that, despite the paint on her cheeks, she looked to-day like an old woman. In her face was plainly written the story of her mania. Here and there, where her skin was not painted, it showed a hideous leaden-grey hue. There were deep and long wrinkles round her eyes. The eyes themselves were hollow, devoid of light. They scarcely looked human, for no soul seemed to gaze out through them. Felix thought they were like the windows of a deserted house in which the shattered glass had been replaced by boards.

'What made you think of coming to-day?' he asked.

He did not know what to say, how to look natural. There was despair in his heart, and a sort of physical fear of her which he had never felt before. At this moment her feebleness disappeared. With a brusque movement, like the movement of a strong woman, she got up and once more began to walk about the room, smiling.

'What made you?' he asked again.

I'll never leave you for a moment. You shan't trick me. Oh, I've been a fool. I've left you in other people's hands. I've trusted you to Alice because—I've thought of the world, what was possible, what people would say! And now I see you there—oh, it's too horrible, too abominable! But now I know what to do. I'll throw everything to the winds and save you myself. I'll be with you. I'll watch you. I don't care for anything—I'll——'

A passion of energy, of excitement, of reckless, furious determination flamed up in him. He wanted to sweep her husband, Alice, every one away from her, to have her to himself that he might act, dare, command, tear her vice out of her, cut it out as the surgeon cuts out a tumour that is eating into the tissues of the body and drawing near to the sources of life.

A tap at the door broke in coldly upon his vehemence. For an instant he could not trust himself to answer it. He could only stop speaking abruptly and sit in quivering, apprehensive silence. The tap was repeated. He forced himself to say 'Come in!' The lift man appeared.

'If you please, sir, Mrs. Wilding to see you; your mother, sir.'

'My——'

He did not finish the sentence, for the man stood aside, there was the sound of a dress rustling in the little passage, and then Mrs. Wilding walked in. She was pale, so pale that Felix noticed it even in that moment of amazement and utter confusion.

'Mater!' he stammered, springing up, and instinctively placing himself between her and Mrs. Ismey. 'You in London!'

The lift man disappeared.

'Oh, I didn't know you had any one with you, Felix,' said his mother.

'Oh yes, Mrs. Ismey,' Felix said, with an almost convulsive attempt at naturalness and ease.

He moved to allow his mother and Mrs. Ismey to meet. The latter had put on her hat quickly, fastening it anyhow on her disordered hair. Felix was filled with a sick consciousness of the extravagance of her appearance. She assumed a fixed smile.

'Such a long time since we met!' she said to Mrs. Wilding.

The smile disappeared, and her face assumed its rigid look of a mask.

'Yes,' Mrs. Wilding answered.

'Sit down, mater. You're just in time for tea,' Felix exclaimed, pulling up a chair to the little table.

He scarcely knew what he felt. His head was buzzing and his hands were frightfully hot.

'Sit down, mater,' he repeated mechanically.

Mrs. Wilding sat down in silence. She had looked at Mrs. Ismey for a moment and then turned away her eyes. Felix began to pour out the tea.

'I 'd no idea you were coming up,' he went on. 'Why didn't you let me know?'

He felt that anything was bearable but silence.

'I only decided to come this morning,' said his mother.

It had struck him that she was terribly pale. Now it struck him that there was a strange, unnatural sound in her voice. It scarcely seemed to be the voice he knew so well. There was something odd about her altogether, but he did not know exactly what it was.

'You aren't fond of London, I fancy?' Mrs. Ismey said. 'Aren't you—I mean, are you?'

She was smiling again.

'No, not very,' Mrs. Wilding replied. 'I find it tiring.'

Felix saw her look for a moment at Mrs. Ismey's hands, at her hair. A sort of wondering expression came into her white face and died away directly.

'Dear me! How funny!' Mrs. Ismey said.

She began to laugh.

'How funny!' she repeated, in a stifled voice. 'Isn't it, Felix?'

She went on laughing till her aimless mirth became intolerable. Felix, with a scarlet face, began to speak to his mother, trying to ignore Mrs. Ismey in the hope that she would recover herself.

'All right at home?' he said. 'How's Margot?'

'Pretty well,' his mother answered. 'But, of course, just now——' She stopped.

She was trying to drink her tea, but it seemed as if the sound of Mrs. Ismey's laughter prevented her. She put her cup down uneasily. Felix saw her shut her eyes for a moment, as people sometimes do when they are undergoing some strain that is almost unbearable to nerves or heart. She sighed, as if she were oppressed both physically and mentally.

'What do you find tiring?' exclaimed Mrs. Ismey, in a voice still shaken by merriment.

'Oh, it 's the noise of the traffic and all that,' Felix answered

hastily. 'London is tiring, you know, especially to people who aren't accustomed to it. Are you going?'

She had got up suddenly.

'Yes,' she answered.

Her mouth gaped. The hideous, convulsive yawning was beginning again. He hurried to the door and opened it.

'Good-bye,' Mrs. Ismey said to Mrs. Wilding, in a half-suffocated voice. 'I'm so —— to have met you again.'

She held out her dirty hand, and, just as Mrs. Wilding was going to take it, drew it away.

'Don't forget about coming to Paris,' she said to Felix, speaking slyly and like a person in a great hurry.

It was the last thing she was able to say before the incessant yawning swam over her voice like a sea, drowning it. She went out of the room holding up her arms. The lift man was outside on the landing.

'Take this lady down, please,' Felix said. 'And if her carriage isn't there'—Mrs. Ismey made an obvious, violent effort to speak, but could not—'put her into a cab and tell the man to go to 100B Green Street, Park Lane.'

He saw her step into the lift. It sank. He saw her painted face, the mouth wide open, descend, disappear out of his sight. For a moment he leaned against the iron cage. Why had his mother come up to-day? He felt angry with her, as if she had come up to spy on him. He was not himself. The turmoil in his heart, love struggling against despair, the desire to redeem against a sort of frenzy of disgust, that was partly physical, drove his brain beyond the confines of pure reasonableness. There are moments when a man is so tormented by circumstance that, though not mad, he is no longer natural. His normal power of control, his normal faculty of seeing things as they are, of understanding rightly what they mean to him and to others—these things are sapped in him. So it was now with Felix. As he stood there on the stone landing, leaning against the iron cage, he felt as if he were on the verge of some outburst, or some breakdown; as if at a word, a touch, he might burst into tears or into fury. If he could only be alone, quite alone, even for five minutes! He felt as if he could not go back to his mother, as if, unless he could be alone, something frightful must happen to him. He stared into the well of the lift, and still seemed to see a painted face yawning as it went down, down into Hell. No, no. Again the heat of desire rushed over him. He was going to save her. He was born for that. This strange love, resisting such hideous attacks, such squalid outrages, was given

to him for that. But—his mother. He gazed almost fearfully at the open door of the flat, at the passage. She was waiting in there for him. What was she going to say, to do? If she spoke of Mrs. Ismey, if she tried to advise him, to play the mentor, he did not know, but he thought he might do something horrible—turn his mother out with a fury of words, or—he did not know. Vaguely he prayed for self-control, he prayed to be allowed to feel natural. At last he came away from the cage and re-entered the flat. He shut the front door. As he did so he heard Chicho whining in his bedroom. He listened for an instant and then walked quickly into the sitting-room. He wondered what his face was like.

His mother was still sitting by the tea-table. She had not drunk her tea. He saw that. He seemed to see everything, to be unnaturally observant at that moment, unnaturally alive.

'Well, mater, I was most awfully astonished to see you,' he said.

'I did not know I was coming till this morning,' she answered. 'I came up with Stephen.'

'Stephen! Where is he, then?'

'He had some things to do. I expect he will meet me at the station and go—go home with me.'

Her voice trembled slightly as she said the last words.

'You—I suppose you couldn't come down to-night?' she said hesitatingly.

'Where? Home? Oh no, I'm afraid I couldn't possibly,' he exclaimed quickly.

The idea of a journey with his mother and Stephen, of a dinner with his mother, a long evening, was horrible. He could not stand it, and he added decisively:

'It's out of the question. I'm sorry, but I've got an engagement to-night.'

'You—you couldn't possibly give it up?'

There was a strange sound in her voice. He noticed it again. Her persistence too was odd, not like her.

'I say, is there anything wrong with Margot?' he asked.

'No. Of course we are very anxious about her, but everything seems to be going pretty well so far.'

'I can't come down to-night. I say, you've never drunk your tea, mater.'

'Haven't I?'

A sort of blank look came into his mother's gentle face, the look that often precedes a fainting fit. It passed away quickly. She lifted the tea-cup and sipped her tea.

'What time is it?' she asked.

Felix took up his watch.

'Half past five. What train d' you mean to catch?'

He was really longing to be alone, and was thinking what a relief his mother's departure would be, but he did not mean her to know it. That she had sensitively understood was shown by her next words.

'I won't keep you, Felix. I know you always have a great deal to do. I can wait at the station easily.'

She began to feel for her icewool shawl, which she had laid down when she came in. It was lying on the edge of her chair, but she could not find it. Her hands looked confused, and as if they were groping for something in the dark.

'Oh, it's all right, mater. There's no hurry. Drink your tea, do.'

'Where is my shawl? Oh—was it there? I didn't see. Thank you.'

He had given it to her. She put it round her throat and got up.

'I say, don't hurry off like that. Mater, I didn't mean I had anything now, only that I was engaged to-night.'

In spite of his almost furious desire to be alone, he began to feel compunction. He had not seen his mother for so long, he saw her so seldom, that he knew he ought not to show what he was feeling. To do so would be cruel. Yet he could not help knowing that he must have done so.

'You must drink your tea properly and have something to eat,' he exclaimed.

'No, I couldn't eat anything, but I'll just——'

She began to drink the remainder of her tea standing up. She finished it hastily and put down the cup.

'I ought really to catch the six o'clock train from Charing Cross,' she said.

'You've arranged to stay with Stephen?'

'No, not yet. But I expect he will be there for that train. We were to take our chance of meeting. He had to go [illegible]

[illegible] that, [illegible] alone. He was not entirely clerical [illegible] thought of [illegible] would mean to [illegible] the conversation.

'[illegible] glimpse of my son,'

She tried to smile brightly but her lips began to quiver. She turned away. After an instant, she said:

'I see you've hung up the picture.'

'"Love and Death"?' he said. 'Yes.'

His voice was very cold. That picture meant too much to him just now.

'Love and—death,' Mrs. Wilding repeated.

She turned round. Her eyes were swimming with tears.

'Look here, mater,' Felix said, 'I see what it is. You're working yourself up into a panic about Margot. That's silly. Think of the millions of——'

'Yes, yes, I know.'

'But you are. That's always your way. You spoil your life by being so timid about everything, always fussing about your own health and——'

'Now I must go,' she said.

Her voice was very odd, he thought. It was very odd, too, the way she interrupted him, she who was always so gentle, so patient a listener.

'Well, do try to be less nervous,' he said. 'You'll be twice as happy.'

He opened the door. Mrs. Wilding looked all round his little room again, slowly, almost like a person who is taking a silent farewell of something. She stumbled as she turned to go out at the door. Felix put out his hand, but drew it away when he saw she had recovered her footing. When they were in the dark passage she said, in a low voice:

'Felix.'

'Well, mater?'

'I want you—will you do something for me?'

'Of course, if I can. What is it?'

'Were you going to Paris?'

'Surely it doesn't matter whether I do or not,' he burst out hotly.

In a moment he felt on the verge of his self-control and as if anything might happen.

'Surely, mater,' he continued, raising his voice without knowing he was doing so, 'surely I am my own master now. At the age of——'

'I only wanted to ask you not to go just now.'

Her voice sounded half ashamed.

'Really, mater, I don't see why. If I go, it will only be for a few days. Everybody runs across to Paris. It's no farther than——'

'I know. Never mind. Good-bye, my dear, dear boy.'

He had opened the front door and let in the light from the landing. His mother lifted her face to kiss him. Her cheeks were wet with tears. He wondered why. He wished she would not cry so easily about nothing. He bent down, rather reluctantly. She kissed him long and passionately. It was he who drew away his face. He went towards the cage to touch the bell for the lift. But suddenly he remembered.

'Oh, you're afraid of—but didn't you come up in it?'

'Yes. I met the conductor at the bottom, and—and I remembered you didn't like my walking.'

'It is nonsense, but if you'd really rather——'

'No, no. It isn't so bad as I expected.'

The lift rose.

'Good-bye,' she said.

She looked at her son, then stepped in a little nervously.

'Good-bye, mater. All right.'

The man pulled the cord and the lift sank down. As it went, Felix saw his mother's large, dark eyes gazing up to catch the last glimpse of him. There were still tears in them, and—he thought—a strange, intense look that he had never seen in them before, that he had not thought they could hold. It was a yearning, even a passionate look.

It almost frightened him, though he did not know why. A sudden impulse came to him to run down, to meet her at the bottom, to say—but what more had he to say to her? Besides, it was too late. She would be out in the street. She would have taken a cab and be gone. Of course she would.

Yet he did go down some steps, driven by this impulse. Then he stopped and mounted slowly.

Why had she looked at him like that? Some words from the Bible came into his head: '*The Lord turned and looked upon Peter.*'

'What is the matter with me to-day?' he said to himself.

He let Chicho out. The little dog jumped up at him eagerly and licked his hands. Felix pushed him away. He kept thinking of, and even repeating to himself, those words:

'*The Lord turned and looked upon Peter.*'

Why had he thought of them. What had they to do with him and with his mother?

CHAPTER XXX

MRS. ISMEY had said to Felix, 'Don't forget about coming to Paris,' and she had said it after his outburst, an outburst in which, however confusedly, however brokenly, he had poured forth his soul. She took him at his word, then. She tacitly abandoned her practice of trying to surround her vice with mystery, of warring eternally against truth. She accepted him as her protector, and put herself in his hands. He was glad. For the fact of her doing so surely, in a manner, pledged her at last to be truthful with him. In his joy over this Felix asked himself whether the reason she had given for her proposed visit could have been the true one. Could she have really meant to visit Barreille on her own account? If so—but no, he would not be a fool, he would not believe it. Alice was truthful, and he knew, from Alice, the web of deceit which Mrs. Ismey was for ever spinning. Morphia bred in her a passion for subterfuge. It had become an instinct in her to pretend that she had given up the mania which governed her whole life—an ineradicable instinct. He must not shut his eyes to that. Though he loved her he must watch her as one would watch a kleptomaniac or a lunatic, always be doubtful of appearances, always be on his guard. He must not hope for rock on which to rest the tired feet of his love. Some day, perhaps—but not yet.

Still, she was coming with him to Paris.

He meant to do as he had said, to be with her always in Paris, never to leave her unwatched. If there was scandal, let it be as poisonous as it would. Let it even blacken her reputation. He would avoid that if he could. He would be as careful, as chivalrously careful, as was compatible with the end he had set himself. But his resolve to save her was a hard, almost a brutal one. He thought of her as he had last seen her in dirt and degradation, laughed at by servants, jeered at—he guessed, he knew it—by the dregs of London in the streets, wondered at by his mother. And, when he thought of her thus, called up the vision of her fearful hands, which had once

been so beautiful, of her painted, yawning mouth, of her hollow, faded eyes and disordered hair, he said to himself that he was right to be audaciously fearless of the world to achieve his surely splendid aim. Mr. Ismey had apparently abandoned her in despair. Then he, Felix, would take his place—he would at least cherish her in sickness. He wished for nothing more. There was nothing physical in his love now. How could there be? Since the moment on Eldon Sands when she took his arm Felix had never thought of her in that way. The foulness of her fault at least kept his love strangely pure, strangely free from the promptings of the flesh.

Now that his resolve was taken he could not wait. It must be carried out at once. That night he wrote to her suggesting that they should start for Paris on the Thursday morning. It was then Tuesday. She replied, in a blotted, almost unreadable scrawl, that she could not be ready until Friday, and that she wished to go by the night train and boat. He guessed the reason of this. She would not face daylight. He yielded to her wishes. On Wednesday evening, just after he had written to say so, Alice called to see him. Since she had told him that she meant to leave Mrs. Ismey Felix had felt differently about her. He could not be quite reasonable in his love and unhappiness. It was difficult for him to see Alice's point of view, and, in his heart, he condemned strongly her resolution to give up her place, and faintly mistrusted her despite the proofs of goodwill that she had given in abundance by her conduct both to Mrs. Ismey and to him. Yet he was glad when he heard her name. It was necessary for him to see her in order to get Barreille's address. In a former conversation with her he had made himself certain that Barreille was a great specialist in morphia cases, that he had achieved cures where other doctors had failed, and that he lived in Paris. Mrs. Ismey sometimes mixed a little truth with her lies, truth that she thought could not interfere with the passion to which her life was devoted.

'I wanted to see you, Alice,' Felix said, when she was shown in. 'I 've got several things to say to you. Please sit down. Oh, but first tell me what you 've come for.'

The maid sat down with her usual quiet primness.

'Well, sir, I wanted to see you before I went,' she said, in her low, and yet rather emotional voice, which matched the expression in her pale, round face.

'You are really going soon?'

'Yes, sir. By the time my lady comes back from Paris I shall be gone—if she goes to Paris.'

'She is going,' Felix said shortly.

'So you say, sir.'

Felix opened his lips to make some hasty remark, but he checked it.

'Go on, please, Alice,' he said quietly.

'Well, sir, I know you think rather bad of me——'

She stopped.

'No, Alice.'

'Yes, sir, you do, for going like this and leaving my lady.'

'I would rather you stopped, certainly,' he said, with the determination to be strictly reasonable. 'But I know I ought not to expect you to sacrifice your future prospects. And I know of course, too, that—well, that you have a great deal to bear, and that it may be wearing you out.'

'I think it is, sir; but it's not only that, nor Robert—that's my young man, sir—saying he won't wait no longer. No, sir; but I want to leave, I don't want to be sent away.'

'Sent away!' he exclaimed in surprise. 'But who should send you away?'

'Mr. Ismey, sir.'

'Mr. Ismey! Has he come back?'

'No, sir, not yet.'

'But—but I thought he had given the whole thing up!'

'Sir, d'you know Mr. Ismey well?'

'Not very well, no.'

'There's a lot in him, sir, for all he seems so quiet.'

Felix remembered that he had always wondered what Mr. Ismey was really like, and had never felt as if he knew.

'Yes?' he said, to make her go on.

'He's not the gentleman to give a thing up, sir, not when he cares.'

'And does—does he care very much?'

Felix hardly knew what answer he wished to have to his question.

'Sir, he loves her. That's the truth of it. And she's breaking his heart.'

She was silent. Felix said nothing. He had not expected this conversation to be momentous.

'He had his try, sir, and when it didn't do and he saw her getting bad again, he went away. But I know him, sir, and I know he'll come back. Mr. Ismey's proud, sir. For months he knew there was something wrong with my lady and her ladyship—Lady Caroline, sir—and he wouldn't say a word nor try to find out what it was. He's not one to spy, sir. Where he

loves he's one to trust. He would trust her, sir, too long. That 's where his fault was.'

'I understand,' Felix said.

He thought of the wedding dinner at Churston Waters, of the scene in the office.

'But now he knows, sir, he 'll never give her up. He 'll come back soon. She don't think it, but he might come any day. And when he does come he 'll send me off.'

'But why should he do that?'

'Well, sir, he was nearly doing it when he first found out, because I knew it and never told him. He would have, only I begged so hard to stop, and I think he saw I did care for my lady and wanted her to get right. I've never pandered to her, sir, though I haven't been able to keep her off the filthy stuff.'

'I know, Alice, I know.'

'But when he gave in about letting me stop—"Alice," he said, "if she gets bad again, you 'll go. She shall have a keeper." Sir, I shall never forget the look in his eyes when he said that. He went red all over his face and then as pale as a cloth. But he would say it again. "She shall have a keeper," he said. And what he says he 'll do. So what with that and Robert, I 'd better go, sir.'

'I see. Yes, I suppose you had.'

Felix spoke slowly. What he had just heard moved him, seemed to bring his feet to the edge of an abyss. He was conscious of being near a void, dark, unfathomable. He looked into it but could see nothing.

'I 've a note from my lady, too, for you, sir.'

'Oh.'

He took it, opened it, read it.

'D' you know what this is?' he said to Alice.

'She wants you to give her the money, sir, for Paris?'

'Yes. She says she has none at all, that she will be ashamed to have to ask me for it for every little thing on the journey.'

'Don't give it her, sir. Don't give her a penny.'

'I won't.'

'If you do she 'll trick you somehow, sir. She 'll get away to those clubs. She means to. That 's why she 's going.'

Felix's face grew hard.

'Give me the address of that doctor, of Barreille,' he said.

When Alice had gone he sat down to think. Again he looked into the void and saw nothing but darkness. He thought of Mr. Ismey and what Alice had said of him, that his wife was breaking his heart. He loved her then, he loved her too. But

had he not abandoned her? Alice said that he would come back, that he would not give in, that he would fight the curse of his life and Mrs. Ismey's again. Yes, Alice said so. But was it true? Besides, Mrs. Ismey hated him now. He had no influence with her. She hated him more than she hated any other human being. And why?

When he came to that the darkness of the abyss seemed to clear a little before Felix. He saw something that made him wish almost for blindness. He shut his eyes. He turned away. He would not see.

It was arranged that he should go with Mrs. Ismey to Paris on Friday night. They were to meet at Victoria Station half an hour before the train started. Felix had wired to Barreille to make an appointment, and had received a reply. Mrs. Ismey did not know this. Felix understood now that it was necessary to fight her with her own weapons. He could no longer dare to be perfectly frank with her. She had received his refusal of the money calmly, even sweetly.

'It was only that I didn't want to bother you for trifles,' she had said. 'And—and it seems so preposterous that I should have nothing, when my husband is a rich man.'

'Yes, I know. But it will be all right. I'll see to everything for you,' Felix answered.

'You're always so good to me,' she said.

She tried to force her rigid face into a smile, but her eyes looked malignant.

That was on Thursday, the last time he was to see her before they met at the station.

On Thursday night he scarcely slept at all. He was naturally excitable, and events now made for excitement in his life. As he lay there in the dark, hearing Chicho's regular breathing, he remembered his many thoughts of Paris. Not London, but Paris, had been the first city of his dreams. Of Paris he had first heard the stories that set his brain on fire, and his heart longing for a greater life than he had ever known. The lamps of Paris had first gleamed across his imagination, the voices of Paris had first murmured in his ears. That evening—that first evening, he called it—when, in the hut in the forest, he heard the huge and flowing tides of life, they rolled upon the Paris streets.

Now he was going there. But how? Strange would be his pilgrimage, far stranger than the tailor's. He would not starve, it was true. His body would not starve. How would he return? He dared not look forward. Yet he was resolute. One thing above all others now gave fibre to his resolution, the

knowledge that Mrs. Ismey hated her husband because he had fought against her passion. He, Felix, was about to do the same thing. He might earn the same reward. He risked so much that the face of Mr. Ismey did not rise up out of the void to look upon him and to reproach him. The fact that in going he threw the dice for his happiness or misery gave him the sense that he was doing right. She had to be saved. Who would dare to say that he had no mission to save her?

He fell asleep towards morning.

On Friday he was terribly restless. He could not be still. When he had packed he did not know what to do, how to pass the hours. At length he resolved to go down to the school, to force himself to work. He had been neglecting Sam lately, but Sam did not mind. When he did present himself Felix was always greeted with the same sweet smile, the same purring welcome. Probably Sam thought him a 'damned fool.' But then he thought that of so many people. He was a believer in Carlyle. Felix carried out his resolve. He went to Eldridge Buildings, chaffed and laughed with Arliss and the other pupils, wrote part of an article, and had an interview with Sam at the end of the afternoon.

'I shan't be here, sir, for a few days,' he said, when he was going.

Sam smiled indulgently.

'You are about to take a little holiday, Mr. Wilding? Well, why not? A holiday clears the mind, restores the tired intellect.'

Felix reddened; the sarcasm was sufficiently apparent, though very soft and sweet.

'Where are you going? Scotland? Morocco? Germany?'

He waved his white hand as if to indicate the globe.

'To Paris, sir.'

'Paris. A very informing place. I know Paris inside out. Every journalist ought to. You are very wise to go there. Paris widens the horizon. Paris—I might almost say—completes the education. Paris and a woman—what more can you want to put the finishing touch on mind and h-eart!'

The words seemed ominous to Felix; he hardly knew why. When he left Sam's school he did not go back at once to his flat. He felt as if he could not bear to be shut up in his little room. So he went to the Club, stayed there some time, and then walked to Victoria Street across the Park. When he reached Wellington Mansions it was half-past five. He meant to be at Victoria at half-past seven. He had still two hours, but he had to dine. That would take up some time.

'There's a note in your room, sir, marked "Urgent,"' said the lift man as Felix was going up.

Felix guessed at once it was from Mrs. Ismey. Perhaps she was not going. Perhaps Mr. Ismey had returned home unexpectedly.

'When did it come?' he asked.

'It must be a good hour and a half ago, I should say, sir,' replied the man, opening the iron door to let Felix out.

'Chicho all right?' he asked, as he put the key into his door.

'Yes, sir; seems settling down nicely.'

'That's good.'

Felix had given the little dog to the porter to be taken care of during his absence in Paris. He shut the door and hurried into his sitting-room. The note lay on the table. He picked it up eagerly and looked at the handwriting. It was his mother's. His mother's! The envelope was unstamped. He examined it. It had not been through the post. She was in London, then. His mother in London again! And why should she write? Why should she not come if she—— He tore the envelope open.

'5B HENRIETTA STREET, CAVENDISH SQUARE.
'Friday, 3 P.M.

'MY DEAREST BOY,—I am in London, here. You will be surprised, I know. I wish very much to see you at once. Can you come? I know you will when I beg you to. We might have—(here two words were very carefully and completely erased)—tea together. Come at once if possible. I might not be able to see you late. Please try to.—With fondest love. Ever your loving MOTHER.'

Felix stood with this note in his hand. He read it two or three times. What did it mean? His mother was staying in London then, staying—but she hated London. She never stayed in London. And how odd her coming away from home now that Margot needed her so much! '5B Henrietta Street, Cavendish Square.' Was it a hotel? Was she with friends? Cavendish Square! That suggested doctors. Could Margot be ill? Could his mother have brought her up? But, if so, would she not have told him that Margot was with her? He could not make it out at all. He looked at the clock. Twenty minutes to six. He must go at once, of course. He had not so very much time. Only an hour and fifty minutes before he had to meet Mrs. Ismey at Victoria Station. He wished his mother had not chosen to-day for coming up. Well, he would keep his eye on the time.

He went out, hailed a hansom, and told the man to drive to 5B Henrietta Street. There was a scud of rain coming on, and the sky was dark. When he reached Hyde Park Corner carriages were pouring out of the Park. The hoods of the victorias were up, for the first drops began to fall. It was cold, too, for May. Felix thought of Mrs. Ismey, then of his mother. He could not imagine her spending a night in London, and all by herself. Surely Margot must be with her. Well, he would soon know. Here was Cavendish Square. He saw a bath-chair go by on the pavement. A woman dressed in a nurse's costume walked beside it holding up an umbrella. The thin, drawn face of a young man looked out from under the hood of the chair. Felix saw his eyes. They had a dazed and wondering expression in them. Felix thought they were like the eyes of a little, young dog that has been cruelly treated, but is at last beginning to know what kindness means. Here was the corner of Henrietta Street. The cabman drove a little way down the street, and drew up before the door of a good-sized house. Felix jumped out, paid, and rang the bell.

Now that he was standing before the door he was more amazed, more curious than ever. It seemed impossible that his mother was really here, in this grey street, behind this dark-green wood and ground glass painted deep red and blue. He glanced at his watch, and thought of the station and Mrs. Ismey meeting him there. The door was opened by a tall woman in a black dress, with a white apron, and an oddly shaped white cap tied under the chin with white strings.

'Is Mrs. Wilding here?' asked Felix.

'Yes,' said the woman. 'Will you please give me your name?'

'Felix Wilding.'

The woman smiled slightly, as if she felt a sort of kindly pleasure on hearing the name.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'You're a little late, but will you come upstairs?'

She turned round. Felix followed her wondering. What was she? A servant? She did not speak like a servant. There was something almost authoritative in her manner. They went up to the first floor. On the landing the woman turned round.

'One more flight,' she said.

And again she smiled with a sort of gentle, a sort of reassuring kindness.

They reached the second landing, and she knocked upon a door. Felix heard a voice say, 'Come in.' It was his mother's

voice. The woman put in her head and said something. Felix could not hear what it was. Then she drew back and said to him:

'You can go in now.'

As he passed her she looked at him, and it seemed to him that there was a great deal of meaning—of kind, even of tender meaning, in her eyes. He walked into the room, and she shut the door behind him quietly. He found himself in a good-sized, comfortably, but plainly furnished bedroom. The curtains were already drawn, and it was lit with electric light from one burner. On a large bed his mother was lying outside the counterpane, fully dressed. She had a little Bible, that he knew well, open in her hand. But she was not reading. She was lying turned on her side, gazing eagerly towards him as he came in, and raising herself up on her elbow. She looked just as usual, less pale than when she had come to tea at Wellington Mansions.

'Mater!' he said, coming up to the bed. 'Why, what on earth are you doing here?'

He bent down. His mother stretched up to him and kissed him.

'Oh, I am so thankful you have come!' she said in a broken voice. 'It was getting so late that I almost thought—I was almost afraid you had gone away. And if you had——'

She stopped speaking.

'No, but I was out. I started directly I had your note. But what's the matter? Is Margot here?'

He was not surprised to see his mother lying down. She often did that.

'No.'

'Well, but then——'

'There's an armchair,' his mother said. 'Quite a comfortable one. Sit down in it. They will bring tea in a moment, but I want to have a little talk with you first.'

She had looked almost as if she were going to shed tears, but now she was smiling gently.

'I don't know that I want tea,' Felix said.

He spoke stiffly. It had suddenly occurred to him that perhaps his mother had come up with the intention of preventing him from going to Paris. She might have thought it over when she was alone in the country and resolved to act firmly. Suddenly he felt sure it was so. She hated London. What else should bring her?

'I haven't very much time either,' he added, under the

influence of this new and disagreeable idea. 'It's a pity you happened to come up to-day because I'm going to Paris to-night by the boat train.'

He stopped. His mother said nothing. A very slight tremor went over her face, upward from lips to eyes.

'But why are you here, mater?' he added. 'Why aren't you staying in a hotel?'

'Felix,' she said, speaking very quietly in a low voice, 'I haven't been feeling very well lately, not for some time.'

'Haven't you?' he said.

He was sitting in the armchair by the side of the bed. He pulled the chair a little nearer without knowing that he did so. Often he began to lecture his mother upon the danger of becoming hypochondriacal when she spoke of her health. To-night something prevented him from doing that.

'Haven't you, mater?' he repeated.

His eyes were fastened on her face.

'No. I didn't know quite what it was. I had a symptom—it rather troubled me. So I called in Doctor Manton and told him about it, and he advised me to come up and consult a specialist, Doctor Egerton Smith, in Harley Street.'

'Is that why you're here? When are you going to see him?'

'I went to see him the other day before I came to tea with you.'

'What did he say?'

Felix spoke quickly and leaned forward in the chair.

'Felix, dear, he examined me, and he said he could do nothing for me.'

There was a silence. Then Felix said:

'Do nothing—but—mater, what did he mean?'

'He thought the—what I suffered from—had been allowed to go too far. I asked him if nothing could be done. You see, it was all so sudden—I could hardly believe that—well, he said he could do nothing at all. And so I came away.'

Felix felt that he had turned absolutely white. He felt that his lips were white. He did not try to say anything.

'After I had had tea with you I went home with Stephen. I told him in the train what Doctor Egerton Smith had said. Stephen thought I ought to take a second opinion. But I did not want to. I felt sure from what the doctor had told me that it would be no use, that nothing could be done. However, Doctor Manton agreed with Stephen. He insisted on bringing me up to-day to see Doctor Henry Wyles. I saw him this morning at twelve. He kept me a long time, and then sent for a very famous young surgeon, Mr. Hill.'

'A surgeon!' Felix whispered. 'Mater!'

'They had a consultation, and decided that it was perhaps possible to save my—to do something for me—if it was done at once. For a moment I refused. You know I am rather a coward. I felt as if I would rather—I mean, I hardly felt as if I could go through it. But then I thought I ought to for—well, you see, there is Margot, and——' She broke off and looked silently at Felix.

He did not say a word.

'So I decided that I would have it done. This house belongs to Doctor Wyles, and—and they will do it here to-morrow morning at nine. That is why I asked you to come. I wanted to——'

She stopped speaking. The tremor went over her face again. There was a dead silence. Before either of them broke it a tap came at the door. Felix sprang up. He walked across the room away from the door and came to the drawn curtains. He heard the door opening, and the rustle of a dress and the clatter of china. He pulled the curtains violently apart, pushed aside the blind, and looked out of the window.

He saw nothing.

Presently—it might have been after years—he heard his mother saying:

'Felix!'

He did not turn round. It seemed to him as if he tried to and failed.

'Felix, dear.'

He tried again and succeeded. He saw a tea-table standing between the empty armchair and the bed, on which his mother was still lying, and he went towards it and her. As he went he was moving his lips and attempting to say something. When he reached the side of the bed, so that he was touching it, he stood still and looked down on his mother. She tried to raise herself towards him and held up one arm, supporting herself on the other. Her expression was an embrace. He took no notice, and she dropped her arm and sank back on the bed. As she did that he saw the lift at Wellington Mansions descending with her. He saw her being carried away, out of his sight. Suddenly he threw himself down on her violently.

'Mater! mater!' he cried out. 'Mater!'

He caught hold of her and shut his eyes, pressing his face hard against her breast.

'Mater!' he said. 'Mother!'

CHAPTER XXXI

AT a few minutes after seven o'clock that evening Felix came out of the bedroom in Henrietta Street and began slowly to descend the stairs. When he reached the first landing he had to pass an open door. He turned his head away from it and quickened his steps, but a woman rustled out, looked over the balusters after him, and then called, in a low but distinct voice, 'Mr. Wilding!' Felix went on till she called again, and then stopped on the stairs but did not turn round to see her. It was the nurse who had let him in, and who was the matron of the nursing-home in which his mother was. She came quickly downstairs till she reached him. Then he half turned, but kept his eyes on the ground.

'Oh, Mr. Wilding,' she said, 'I only wanted to say a word. You're coming to-morrow, are not you?'

'Yes,' he said.

'I'm glad of that. To feel you are in the house will cheer your mother up. She was longing for that.'

'I'm coming,' he said.

'Do you think you could manage to come by a quarter or twenty minutes to nine, so that I should have time to let her know you are actually here before it begins?'

'I'll come at half-past eight.'

'Thank you.'

The nurse paused a moment. Felix knew she was looking at him with gentle kindness and sympathy.

'Don't be too much upset, if you can help it,' she said at last. 'Doctor Wyles says there is a real chance for her. And she's so brave. I've been telling her all about it this afternoon. I couldn't do that to some people. But she wished to know. I've never had any one so brave in the home all the time I've been here.'

Felix nodded. He went down a step or two, while the matron stood looking pityingly after him. Then he turned round.

'D'you know that I've called my mother a coward?' he said.

'Oh, Mr. Wilding!' said the matron, startled.

'Yes, often.'

'That was before you knew what your mother was?' said the matron gently.

'Yes,' he answered. 'Before I knew.'

'We'll look for you at half-past eight to-morrow. Don't be downcast.'

'Good night,' he said.

In a moment she heard the hall door shut on him.

When he was in the street he stood still. He knew he had to go to Victoria to meet Mrs. Ismey and tell her that they could not go to Paris. He knew also that he had not much time. It was past seven already. Yet he waited. He did not feel as if he could go away from this house, leaving his mother there alone, lying on that bed waiting for the night—and the morning. She had always disliked London so much. Just then that thought made everything seem more terrible. If only it could have been at Hill House. If she could have been in her own room, with the garden outside, her own servants about her, Margot not far off. He looked up at the house to the second-floor windows and put up his hand to his face. It was icy cold.

An empty hansom came slowly down the street. He made a gesture to catch the cabman's attention and got in.

'Go to 100B Green Street, Park Lane,' he said. 'As quick as you can.'

It was just possible that Mrs. Ismey might not have started, that he might be able to stop her. He hoped so, as much as he could hope anything. The idea of a great railway-station, lit up, was frightful to him. People would be able to see his face there. The cabman drove on as fast as the traffic would let him. Felix leaned back in a corner of the cab, stiffening his body and stretching out his legs. He knew that it was very likely that he had seen his mother alive for the last time. And not two hours ago he had not known that she was ill. Not two hours ago he had been the son who was always ready to laugh at her ailments and sneer at her as a coward.

He shut his eyes. He saw her lying outside the bed in Henrietta Street, turned towards the door so that she might see him coming in. Then he saw her in his flat, standing up and hastily finishing her cup of tea, because he had let her see that her company was irksome to him, and that he wished to get rid of her when she came to him after receiving her death-warrant from Doctor Egerton Smith.

When he thought of that he did not wonder that his eyes were

incapable of shedding any more tears. But he did wonder that the pulse of his heart could go on beating regularly.

He remembered many other things too; almost every occasion, he thought, when he had been unkind to his mother, when he had trampled upon her unfailing love, when he had faintly jeered at her always humble advice, and had shrunk from her anxious tenderness.

How had he been able to do it? What a mystery that was to him now. For he knew how intensely he had really been loving her all the time: all the time that he seemed to be ignoring her, forgetting her, pushing her out of his life, denying her access to his mind, refusing almost brutally the soft advances of her influence. Yes, all the time he had been loving her intensely. It was as if he had been at the other side of the world from himself, loving her.

And now, perhaps, it was all over. He had just said good-bye to her without speech, kneeling at the side of the bed. He had held the body that was to be lacerated in a few hours, lacerated by men whom he had never seen. He had felt its life, perhaps, probably, for the last time. He had received, perhaps, the final kiss of his mother's soul. At this time to-morrow night it was most likely that people would be coming to him for directions about her burial.

'But she knows now,' he said to himself. 'She knows about me now.'

He kept on repeating that to himself mechanically, and trying to gain a little comfort from it. He had forgotten why he was driving and where, forgotten what he had to go through before he could shut himself up and be alone.

'Isn't this it, sir?'

. . . . . .

'Isn't this the house, sir?'

'Oh—what—are we——?'

He stumbled out of the cab, and was just going to ring the bell of Mrs. Ismey's house when the hall door was opened by Alice.

'Alice!' he said.

'I saw you out of the window, sir,' she said, 'and—but whatever's the matter?'

'Has Mrs. Ismey gone yet?'

'Sir, what is it? Oh, sir, has anything happened to my lady?'

She caught hold of his arm. Felix took her hand away gently.

'No. I haven't seen her. Then she has gone to the station?'

'Yes, sir.'

He began to turn away, but the maid stopped him.

'Sir,' she said, 'Mr. Ismey is coming back to-night. We don't know what time, but he's coming.'

Felix stood still.

'To-night!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Does she know it?'

'Yes, sir. She's in an awful state to get away. She knows what he'll do when he does come.'

'Alice,' Felix said, 'Mrs. Ismey won't go to Paris to-night. I'm not able to take her.'

The maid looked surprised and anxious.

'You can't go, sir?'

'No.'

'But then—oh, sir, you'll have a fearful trouble with her when she finds out. You'll never get her to come back here now Mr. Ismey's coming home. She's mad to be away from him.'

'I can't take her to Paris.'

He stood there on the step, and Alice stood in the doorway looking at him with her small, steady eyes, which were alight with curiosity.

'I'm afraid something dreadful's happened, sir,' she murmured. 'You do look bad.'

'I'll bring her back, Alice. I promise that,' he replied.

He crossed the pavement and got into the cab.

'Go to Victoria,' he said to the man. 'London, Chatham, and Dover station.'

The man drove off. Alice stood watching the cab disappearing down the street. When it was out of sight she shook her head, sighed, and went into the house slowly.

Felix gave himself up once more to those visions which broke upon the twilight and faded away—visions of his mother and of himself, as they had been together.

One came now that had not come before. He saw her knocking at his bedroom door in the night at Churston Waters, the night of that Sunday on which Mrs. Ismey's telegram had arrived. She could not sleep because he had parted from her in anger. He was awake in his bedroom. He heard her knock and held his breath and did not answer. Now he saw her cross the landing slowly and go into her room. When she was there he saw her praying—for him.

He did not dare to pray for her. All the angels were surely doing that to-night.

The cab drew up at Victoria Station. A porter detached himself from the line of waiting men and came forward.

'Any luggage, sir?'

Felix shook his head. When he had paid the cabman he walked into the station. First he went to the Continental booking-office. There were several travellers waiting their turns by the wooden barrier. Others were sitting on benches against the wall, looking watchful and vexed. But Mrs. Ismey was not among them, and he made his way out on to the platform. There was a glare of light from the long bookstall. Smoke rose from the engines drawn up under the domed roof. One whistled piercingly. Felix thought it was like a person screaming, or an animal under the knife. It began to let off steam with a fierce, hissing noise. The jets of white vapour gushed out from the painted iron, obscuring the air. Felix felt dazed. He thought he was looking about for Mrs. Ismey, but in reality he was standing still and staring vacantly before him, lit up by the burners on the bookstall. When a hand touched him he started violently and turned, expecting to see Mrs. Ismey.

'Stephen!' he said.

It was his brother-in-law, who had come up, as he knew from his mother, with her and Doctor Manton, and who was now going back to Frankton Wells to be with Margot, whose confinement was expected immediately. In their last interview—perhaps their last on earth—his mother had told him of Stephen's great and delicate tenderness to her in these days of agony. He had been the only relation to whom she had told the truth. For she feared to reveal it to Margot in her present condition. But for Stephen, Felix knew that his mother would have been utterly alone that night with her tragedy, that night when he—her son—had almost pushed her out to face approaching death amid the bustle and the roar of a city full of strangers. He had not known. For how could she tell him? But she had told Stephen. Stephen had been to her what he—Felix—should have been, and was unworthy to be. And the clergyman had entirely put aside his own anxiety about Margot. He had even insisted on coming up to London again with Mrs. Wilding, and, when the new decision was taken, had offered to remain in London during the operation, to stay in the room with her if the doctors would permit it, and if his presence would be any comfort to her. 'Margot would wish it if she knew,' he had said.

All this Felix was aware of, and thought of with bitter shame, as he looked at Stephen's grave, brick-red face, over which his black hat, pulled down to his eyebrows, cast a shade.

'What, Felix!' said his brother-in-law, grasping him by the hand. 'I am glad to see you here. I have been having some food in the restaurant, and am going to the other station. Are you looking for me? Did she tell you—did the mother tell you I should be here? You have seen her?'

'Yes. I didn't know. But—I 'm glad, Stephen.'

He wrung Stephen's hand.

'Isn't she brave?' Stephen said.

Felix felt his lips beginning to quiver. He knew he could not talk about it.

'We must be like her,' Stephen added quietly. 'As far as we can.'

'Stephen,' Felix said, with a great effort to be calm, 'I want to speak to you. You 've helped her—you 've—you 've been all that I ought to have been to her.'

'No, Felix. She had not told you.'

'No.'

He paused.

'She didn't tell me,' he went on huskily, 'because she couldn't. She could tell you. I 've—I 've been a beast to her, and you 've been a son. Thank you, Stephen.'

He wrung his brother-in-law's hand again roughly. Stephen returned the grasp.

'Margot doesn't know,' he said. 'We dared not tell her till the child was born.'

'I know. When——'

'It may be to-morrow.'

'To-morrow—how strange!'

If the birth, the death, should be on the same day! He met Stephen's eyes, and saw again that human look which had struck him in them once before.

'Will you send me a wire to-morrow when it is all over, when the result is certain?' said Stephen.

'Yes, at once. Oh, Stephen, if—if——'

He stopped. He was beginning to tremble as he stood there among the hurrying people.

'She is brave,' Stephen said. 'And, Felix, she is prepared.'

Felix nodded.

'Good night. Thank you, Stephen.'

He watched his brother-in-law's precise, black-coated figure disappear in the throng. He had forgotten why he was at the station, but now that he was left alone he remembered, and moved away. The glare from the bookstall was becoming intolerable to him. He thought everybody on the platform—the

She looked as she had looked on the beach at Eldon Sands, when she was searching for the cigarette-case, haggard, ferocious, and half crazy.

'I can't go to Paris. I'm so sorry. It's not my fault. Something — something very dreadful has happened. My mother——'

'Your mother! What has your mother to do with us? How can she prevent our going? Your mother! Why, you don't mean to say——'

'Hush! My mother is very ill in London——'

'You've promised me, you've pledged your word, you've——'

Felix got up, went to the carriage door and shut it on the astonished porter. As the blinds of the carriage had all been drawn, Mrs. Ismey and he were now absolutely alone and unobserved in the dim light that gleamed from the roof. The long shriek of an engine sounded in the distance. Mrs. Ismey beat her hands in the air.

'You've got to come!' she exclaimed excitedly. 'You've promised me, you've pledged your word, and I hold you to it!'

'Listen to me,' he said, speaking very distinctly. 'My mother has come up to London to undergo a terrible operation. She is in a private hospital, and the operation is to-morrow morning. It is a matter of life or death. Now you understand why I can't go.'

'You've promised me. You've brought me here. I've been waiting here an hour. I've had to arrange everything——'

She spoke as if she had not heard what he said, and with increasing and ungovernable excitement.

'Do you understand what I am saying?' he said, quietly but rather loudly.

'I know. I dare say your mother is ill. She looked ill the other day. But she'll get well. It'll all come right. We aren't doctors. We can't help her. Go and get the tickets. Go at once.'

'I can't go,' he said.

A flush appeared on the livid grey of her cheeks.

'You must get out,' he continued. 'I'm terribly sorry. I only knew to-night.'

'I won't get out!' she cried furiously. 'How can you ask me to when you've brought me here? I will go to Paris. I will go.'

'It's impossible,' said Felix. 'Now come, please.'

At this moment the porter opened the door of the compartment.

'I beg pardon, sir,' he said, 'but if this luggage is to be registered——'

'It is to be registered!' Mrs. Ismey cried out, turning to the door. 'Go and register it to Paris!'

'But the ticket, ma'am——'

Felix began to grow desperate, but he still looked and seemed calm.

'Wait! I'll arrange it,' he said to the porter.

'I can't leave my mother,' he whispered to Mrs. Ismey. 'You know it. I—I may never see her again.'

'Nonsense! You're talking rubbish. She's exaggerating just to keep you in London. She hates me, and she's——'

'Be quiet!' he said.

His voice was suddenly fierce.

'Oh, I know mothers!' she cried, pushing her veil higher up on her white, furious face. 'They're always like that, always afraid their sons are getting into mischief. She's laughing at you and pretending——'

He sprang up and put his hand over her mouth.

'I won't allow you to speak of her!' he said passionately.

She writhed on the seat, and threw her head back to get free from his hand.

'Give me the money, then, give me the money!' she burst out frantically. 'I'll go alone!'

He thought of the reason why he had meant to take her to Paris, and a sudden passion of pity drove out the passion of anger that had been in his heart an instant before.

'No,' he said gently. 'You can't go alone.'

'I can. I will. I never wanted you to come. You'd only be in the way. I hate you. Give me the money! Give me the money!'

Two or three people had joined the porter at the door of the carriage.

'Hush, for God's sake! There are people——'

'Give me the money! I haven't a farthing. Give me the money!'

She thrust out her hands to him furiously.

'Hush! Don't!'

He caught her hands in his. She screamed as if fire had touched her. He let them go.

'Don't touch me! Give me the money! You shall! I will have it! I will, I——'

A crowd was gathering. A bell rang. A voice shouted some words monotonously. They were taken up by another voice farther down the platform.

'Come,' Felix said. 'You must come.'

CHAPTER XXXII

ON the following morning, as eleven o'clock was striking in the church steeples of London, one of the clerks in the Vere Street post-office saw a tall, well-dressed boy come in at the swing-door. A good many people were in the office at the moment, and the boy stood looking dazed by the bustle and noise around him. There were two patches of vivid red on his white face. His eyes shone feverishly, and he looked intensely self-conscious, so much so that the clerk's attention was attracted towards him. After standing still for a minute he came up to the counter from which telegrams are sent, glanced at the clerk, looked quickly away, as if to meet human eyes was intolerable to him, pulled a form towards him and began to write.

He wrote slowly. When he had finished he felt in his pocket and found half a sovereign. He felt again, but apparently could not find any other coin, for he put the half-sovereign down on the telegraph-form and pushed it under the grille which divides the clerks from customers. The clerk took the form, and began to count the number of words, reading them as he did so.

'Rev. Stephen Bosanfield, St. Mary's Rectory, Frankton Wells, Kent.—It is over, was terrible, but doctors say successful; she is still unconscious; am going back now to wait till she knows. —FELIX.

'What's that word, sir?' asked the clerk, looking up with his pencil against the last word.

But the boy had disappeared.

The clerk stared at the half-sovereign.

'And only one-and-fourpence-halfpenny to pay!' he murmured. 'Well, I'm sure!'

He picked up the half-sovereign and smiled.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ON an evening of August in that year Felix arrived in Tours. He was alone. He went to the Hôtel de Bordeaux, got rid of the dust gathered during the hot journey from Paris, dined in the long and narrow *salle à manger* with a heterogeneous collection of travellers, mainly French, and then strolled out into the town. The weather was superb, voluptuously warm. Thousands of stars showed themselves serenely in the sky, which looked, Felix fancied, unusually near to the earth. The rows of trees along the wide avenue, which stretches down the hill from the canal to the place of the fountains, were heavy with leafage. Beneath them walked a merry population, accompanied by many a little dog: stout fathers and mothers, small girls with pigtails, small boys with close-cropped hair and partially bare legs, grisettes with brilliant dark eyes, broad bosoms, and white caps with frills, short soldiers smoking cigarettes, workmen with flat caps and striped shirts, carrying their coats slung over their shoulders, and walking heavily and loosely in their wide trousers. The soft air was alive with French chatter. A priest went by in a long black *soutane* and a broad-leaved black hat. Before the hotels the chefs and their assistants lounged in their white jackets, with the sleeves turned back from their wrists, enjoying their release from the suffocating kitchens, and gossiping gaily about the passing women. The fountains played in their basins among the brilliant flowers. Lights gleamed from the cafés, between the painted tubs of evergreens.

Felix did not stop in any café. He had an end in view. He turned up the Rue Nationale, walking more quickly now that he found himself between tall houses, and presently came out on the broad space where the carriages stand, and saw the Loire, the bridge, the bathing establishments, like long boxes floating in the water, the snakes of lamps stretched upon the side of the hill beyond the river. A bugle rang out from the barracks. He stood still to hear it. As he walked, ever since he quitted the hotel, he had been trying to do a difficult thing, to regain an old impression. He wished to-night to renew in himself the mind

of his youth here on his first evening in France. He wanted to revive the bygone fragrance of his dreams which, like a subtle perfume kept in an unstoppered flagon, had evaporated in the wide winds of life. But, while he was walking, he had failed in his effort. Succeeding events thronged round him, whispering of the differences they had sown in his nature, whispering of the plants that were springing up and changing the face of it. He had tried to recall the old Felix and had been companioned by the new.

The voice of the bugle wrought a miracle, as music so often does. As he heard it ring out in the starry darkness he was conscious of a resurrection, silent but complete. The graves gave up their dead within him; hooded figures of the boy's hopes, wonders, longings, determinations stole forth.

The people of the town went by intent on their evening business or pleasure; the women and the soldiers, the lounging boys and leaping children. They only saw a stranger, an *Anglais*, standing to stare at a fragment of foreign life. They did not see the yawning graves, the hooded figures stealing out.

Presently Felix moved. He walked on to the bridge and leaned over the parapet. The river was not in flood. It had been a dry summer in Tours, and the water had sunk low in its bed. But it still ran with force and swiftness between the arches of the bridge, still eddied round them with a dull and sucking murmur. And the fishermen were there, as of old, upon the banks, like dolls leaning over their thin, black lines. Upon the island the masses of the leafy trees towered sombrely towards the stars. Among them scattered lights shone faintly. A band was playing in some hidden place. Felix heard it as if from another world.

Once more he was gripped by the boy's acute consciousness of the mystery in life, in the life of man and the life of nature, and each seemed in some strange way to reflect or echo the other. He gazed across the hurrying river, and felt that in his soul, too, there were dark places like the dark places of the woods; and there were murmuring waters and there were scattered stars. He looked down. How fast the water flowed. And with it, once more, many passions and many sorrows seemed to flow together, and to pass whispering by, on to some distant ocean of which he had never seen the foam or heard the wave. Again longing was born in him; but it was more timid than it had been, more self-conscious, more wistful. For now he knew the measure of his impotence. Ah, yes, he knew it. And the hooded figures sought their graves. And the new Felix stood there gazing down on the dim river.

He had striven and failed utterly. His self-conceit of old days here in France reared itself up before him like a monster in the night. Yet he was resolved that his defeat should not render him weak. He would strive again, and, if it was to be, suffer again as a man. His wounds, by their throbbing, should nerve him for the fight. Of his pain he would make a friend. In his disillusion he would seek for the true courage, the courage that is born not of ignorance but of knowledge.

He had left his mother at Churston Waters. Her recovery had been slow and difficult, but very happy. She was feeble even now. But she was at peace. When Felix said good-bye to her she was lying on the sofa near the open window of the drawing-room. Margot sat near her. Margot's baby-son was tucked into the hollow of her arm. Chicho lay at her feet. And her white face was serene, even though tears shone in her eyes as she kissed Felix and watched him go. They understood each other now, and that was beautiful to the mother, more beautiful, perhaps, than Felix could ever realise.

Mrs. Ismey he had not seen again. But he knew that she was in this very country of France, a patient in a home for the victims of morphia at Ivry-sur-Seine.

Presently he left the river, and walked back through the long, cheerful street to the Café de L'Univers. He sat down at one of the little tables. A *garçon* came, and he ordered something, he scarcely knew what. He only wanted to sit there quietly and to think a little under the stars. The statue of Balzac loomed up near him in the mystery of the night. He looked at it, and remembered his fancy about the face, that it was confronting everything in the world without fear, without pity, but with a penetrating determination to know the truth. Then he thought of King Marshall, of Antonino Marza. Many men sought for truth, but to each one surely truth seemed a different thing; to one sad, to another glorious, to another terrible, to another merely sordid. And then he thought about the boy who had sat in the ruined chapel reading *La Comédie Humaine*, and who had triumphed in the knowledge that it brought him. What can bring true knowledge? He asked himself that question. Suffering, love, or only death? Suffering, he thought, can bring some. Love can bring much. And death? He knew his mother in that moment when he knew that death stood beside her. Perhaps death would tell him everything. But he wished to live, though he so wished to know. For youth was in him. He wished to live, but he resolved that he would be like the Arabs, utterly fearless of death. Is it not only the coming of the truth?

The domino-players left their tables. The lights went out in the cafés. The *garçons* took off their aprons, and came forth transformed into the night, with soft, black hats upon their heads, and cigars in their mouths.

And Felix walked slowly to the hotel. He thought of Paul Chalmers, who had gone back to his piano-tuning, of Happy Hal, who was once more singing soberly with his two voices on the Dover Harbour Works, persuaded by his little wife to relinquish the dangerous path to fame, of his mother at rest in her long bedroom looking over the garden and the churchyard, of Chicho with her.

And then he thought of a woman shut up from the world at Ivry-sur-Seine.

All this was life. And what did it mean? And to what end —or beginning—would it come?

The night, forsaken by men who gave themselves to sleep, strove to tell Felix. It seemed to him as if every star were a word trembling upon its lips.

. . . . . .

Two days later he bade Grand'mère 'au revoir!' and set out from La Maison des Alouettes into the forest to visit the tailor. He had written to tell the old man he was coming. Somehow he did not feel inclined to take him by surprise. Had things been different, perhaps,—but not now.

His heart was very full as he followed the familiar path, and thought of that first day of winter so long—it seemed—ago. He had promised the tailor to come back, triumphantly he had promised. Gaily he had said that he was setting forth into the world to know, and that he would return to tell of his knowledge. Well, here he was returning. As he wound among the great trees, crushing the twigs beneath his feet, brushing aside the hardy, obstinate ferns, he was oppressed for a moment by a rising bitterness. Now that he was once more here, where he had formed such mighty hopes, egoism rose up in him. Self-pity woke in his heart. 'Why was I born to suffer and to fail, to be tricked and deluded where I put my trust, to be impotent and to be shown my impotence?' he thought. And he heard again Mr. Ismey's last, stern words, and he saw his youth for a moment tarnished irreparably, beyond recovery. Its beauty was marred. He imagined it a perfect statue which had been thrown down from its pedestal and broken. Yet was it ever perfect? Is perfection a gift of God to the newly born, or is it a thing to be won, hardly, at the end of a lifetime, or of many lifetimes? And even then, when it is won, is it not

still a gift, like the little cross the king pins on the soldier's breast?

He wondered, how he wondered!

But the path widened. The spaces between the trees grew greater. He saw the clearing, the cottage. A shrill bark rose up in the quiet air. It was the welcome of the little Honoré, who ran forward curling his tail tightly, and treading on the tiptoes of his yellow paws. The cottage door quickly opened and on the threshold appeared the bent figure of the tailor, holding his shears in his large-veined hands, and peering out under his tufted eyebrows. A strange, boyish happiness burst up suddenly in Felix's heart. He hurried on, came up to the old man, seized his hands.

The shears fell to the ground with a clatter. Felix felt the fierce tuft of the tailor's bristling imperial upon his two cheeks. Once again the pointed nose of the little Honoré explored asthmatically the mysteries of his boots. He laughed aloud and broke into a torrent of speech.

But later, when he entered the cottage, he grew grave.

'Ah, Louis,' he said, 'I see you have kept the books.'

'But naturally, monsieur!' cried the tailor, who was rummaging in a corner of the chamber with his back turned to Felix. 'They are my only companions, but for the little Honoré and the little Marthe. How should I not keep them?'

'You don't think they are dangerous, Louis? That books may be enemies rather than friends? Did you not tell me that those books drove you to Paris, and that in Paris you starved?'

And he thought of his own starvation.

'Monsieur,' said the tailor warmly, 'would you have a great man, when he writes, think all the time of the little men who may read him? Would you have had Monsieur de Balzac cease from writing, lest the little dwarf who measured him for trousers without feet should be moved to set forth and starve in Paris? *Oh, la, la!*'

He turned round and came up to the table, holding a flat bottle in his large hands.

'No, monsieur, no! If the little are turned to folly by the writings of the great, believe me it is the fault of the little. And now a glass of wine, monsieur. A glass of the wine of Vouvray to drink to your return!'

He uncorked the bottle, poured the wine into two glasses, gave one to Felix and took the other himself. Felix felt the irony of the situation.

'To the health and happiness of monsieur!' said the tailor.